



THE CHRISTMAS CHRONICLES

# THE HIDDEN GIFT

A FATHER CHRISTMAS ORIGIN STORY  
ANNETTE K. LARSEN

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# THE HIDDEN GIFT

A Father Christmas Origin Story

Annette K. Larsen

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To all those who put everyone else above themselves.  
It's time to let someone take care of you.

MY CHIN TREMBLED as I crept down the corridor, hugging the wall. I'd been returning the housekeeper's tea tray to the kitchen and was about to head back upstairs when I heard Brunson's harsh words coming from the sitting room.

My heart sank. I didn't have to look into the room to know that the butler was taking his anger out on Cecily.

Again.

I should have stayed out of it. I was only a chambermaid, and the butler could make my life just as miserable as he was making Cecily's if I tried to interfere. I crept closer anyway.

"And this here?" Brunson's voice drifted through the open door, condescension and cruelty dripping from his words. "Is this what you call clean?"

"I just hadn't gotten to—" Cecily's words were cut off by the abrupt sound of a slap.

I covered my own mouth with my hand.

It had started less than a month ago. Our employment here had been going well. Lord and Lady Calderon were young—only in their thirties—and they had one daughter, Willa. The Calderons were pleasant enough to work for, and the housekeeper and butler were fair most of the time.

But then the Calderons had gone to visit family in Winhaven, and Brunson's strictness had turned more pointed. I didn't understand why, but he targeted Cecily. She was the one he berated and abused, but each cruel word and violent outburst tore at my own soul, causing a throbbing ache down in my gut. I was powerless to stop it.

"Now get up and make yourself useful," he spat. Then his footsteps clicked in my direction, and I pressed myself deeper into the shadows along the wall.

The butler stepped out into the corridor, his figure backlit by the lanterns that burned in the sitting room. He smoothed back his graying hair, which was tied at his nape, then he tugged down on his vest, clasped his hands behind his back, and walked in the opposite direction from where I was hiding, looking every bit the stoic and dignified servant that he was supposed to be.

The moment he was out of sight, I rushed into the sitting room. Cecily was there on the ground in front of the fireplace, weeping with a hand cradling her cheek. She looked up, her eyes wild when she heard me enter, but the fear left them as soon as she recognized me, replaced instead by despair.

"I don't know what I did wrong, Annabelle," she said amidst her sobs.

Closing the door behind me, I rushed to her and dropped to my knees so I could wrap her in my arms. "You didn't do anything wrong. It's not your fault."

"But if I were better at my job—"

I framed her face with my hands, forcing her to look up at me. "No," I said clearly. "This isn't about you being competent. You *know* that. I don't know why he's chosen to take his cruelty out on you, but it's not because of anything you did. Do you understand?" My voice shook, but I managed to keep my tears in my eyes. I had to be strong for her. At sixteen, she was three years younger than me, and I loved her like a sister. I had to take care of her. Over the past six months, she and I

had managed to build a new life here, but now it was being ruined by Brunson's viciousness.

I owed Cecily so much. I was here in Tethurn, close to my family again, because of her, because she'd trusted me when I'd told her that this place would be safe for both of us.

"I just want him to leave me alone," she said as she buried her face in my shoulder.

"I know," I whispered as I rocked her, blinking back my own tears. "I know. Come on now. I'll help you finish." Because if she didn't finish her work, the consequences would be all the worse tomorrow. I wove my arms under hers and tried to pull her to her feet.

"Ow!" she cried out and fell back down.

"What is it?" I asked, my hands fluttering over her, wondering where the injury was.

She took a deep breath, trying to control her tears. "I was up on a stool when he came in. He pulled it out from under my feet, and I twisted my ankle."

My anger heated further. This wasn't just Brunson being overly rough when giving a lecture; this was deliberate. He *wanted* her hurt.

Why? *Why* did he do this to Cecily?

I readjusted my grip, hoping to help her to a chair at least, but I froze when steps sounded in the hallway.

We both turned to the door, eyes wide.

The door opened, and a man leaned inside, his brow concerned as he looked around. Then his eyes landed on us, and he pushed further into the room. "I heard a noise."

Relief swept through me. I didn't recognize his face, but he looked to be in his early twenties. His sleeves were rolled to the elbow, and though he no longer wore the uniform of a footman, I was sure that's what he was.

"Oh, good." I beckoned him closer. "I need your help."

"Of course," he said, already halfway across the room. "What happened?"

"I—" Cecily started and then sucked a breath through her teeth as she winced in pain.

"She fell from the stool. Her ankle is injured." I let my eyes run over his physique and then nodded to myself. "You can help me get her to her quarters."

He blinked in surprise but nodded. He probably wasn't used to being ordered about by maids, but he allowed it nonetheless.

We started out by each taking one of Cecily's arms over our shoulders, but with him being so tall, it was awkward and uneven.

"Here," he said after a few steps. "Allow me." He bent and picked Cecily up.

I checked Cecily's face to be certain this was all right with her. She looked a bit stiff, but I saw no fear in her expression. "Follow me," I said and led the way through the house and down the stairs. How fortunate we were that he had come along. It would have been ten times more difficult to get her down to the room that she and I shared in the servants' hall if I'd helped her on my own. I opened our door but stood blocking it. "Set her down here. I'll get her inside."

"Of course." He gently lowered Cecily down to her foot.

I threaded my arm around her waist and helped her hobble over to her bed.

"What about my work?" she asked, anxiety laced through her tone.

"I'll take care of it right now."

She frowned and blinked to prevent her tears from falling but managed to squeak out a "Thank you."

I just smiled my reassurance and hurried away. It was late already, and I was more tired than usual, but this couldn't wait.

I closed our door behind me and turned, surprised to find the footman still standing in the hall. His hands were buried in his trouser pockets, concern softened his striking blue eyes, and a frown was visible through his neatly kept beard. "Will she be all right?"

I sighed and leaned back against the door, my thick braid cushioning the back of my head. "I believe so. Thank you for helping."

"I'm glad I heard the noise." His forehead remained scrunched as he studied me.

I cut my eyes away, wondering what he was looking for. "If you'll excuse me, I must finish her tasks," I said as I stepped around him.

"You're doing her job?" he asked, following after me.

"It needs to be done, and it's not her fault she was hurt."

"I meant, surely the housekeeper will understand if it doesn't get done. She is injured."

I nodded my head, climbing the stairs that led from the lower servants' quarters to the main floor. "The housekeeper will. The butler won't."

"Doesn't he leave the managing of the maids to the housekeeper?"

"For the most part, yes. But sometimes he feels the need to step in," I said, hearing the hard edge that crept into my voice. That edge had developed over the past month as I'd seen Brunson slowly chip away first at Cecily's confidence and now at her physical well-being.

The footman didn't respond, and when I looked at him over my shoulder, his bewildered face reminded me that he was new here.

Reaching the top of the stairs, I let out a sigh and turned to face him. "If you're working for him, you'll find out soon enough. Brunson used to be strict but fair. But lately... he has a mean streak, a temper. The moment you start to think you're on his good side, he'll find a way to lord his authority over you. It's usually subtle, but for the past month, his treatment of Cecily has become worse and worse. I don't know why"—I shook my head, still just as baffled over the situation as I had been the first time he'd hurt her—"and none of us dare ask."

"Why not report him?"

"Lady Calderon won't tolerate anyone speaking ill of him. And the whole family has been gone for the past month. There's been no one to tell."

He looked truly troubled, and I wondered if I'd spoiled his cheery view of what his new job might have been. "I'm sorry he treats her that way" was all he said.

"As am I. So, now you know a little more about the man you work for. What was your name, anyway?"

"Nicolai."

"Welcome to Fowler House, Nicolai. I have to get back to work, but thank you for your help."

"You're welcome," he said simply and continued to stand there, looking troubled as I walked away.

On my way back to the sitting room, I stopped to tell the housekeeper, Mrs. Thornton, what had happened.

"Again?" she asked in dismay.

I nodded, wishing I had a better explanation, but I was just as baffled and even more infuriated than she was. "He said her work was unsatisfactory," I said with an angry shrug.

She huffed. "Yes, well, if he had a problem with the work, he should have come to me. He's got no right to punish her. I don't care that he's been serving Lady



Calderon's family for the past twenty-five years. The maids' work falls under my purview." She tossed her quill down on her desk and hustled from the room, her chatelaine tinkling as she went. I knew that she would check on Cecily and arrange for any remedies she might require.

I went to the sitting room and mechanically finished Cecily's chores, grateful that I'd become familiar enough with her routine that I could finish it in a timely manner. My own duties still needed my attention and would need to be completed before I retired.

Creases marred my brow as I thought over the last month. We'd come here six months ago, after I'd helped Lady Wendolyn Cecilia Stoffard escape an unwanted marriage and a callous uncle. She'd become just Cecily and we'd been working alongside each other ever since. Fowler House provided good work, and although I'd never liked Brunson, it hadn't mattered much. I answered to Mrs. Thornton. His treatment of the footmen and the others who answered to him was perfectly fair. But when he'd started inserting himself into the workings of the female staff, we'd all bristled. He was out of line, but the Calderons were gone, and when his sudden temper had turned fixedly on Cecily, we thought it would soon pass. But after a month, his seeming hatred toward her had not abated.

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The swelling in Cecily's ankle went down quickly. Livvy and I helped her to finish her tasks the next day, and after that, she said she was well enough to get on with it by herself. I breathed a sigh of relief and hoped that Brunson would leave her alone.

That only lasted a week.

"What was his excuse this time?" I asked as I dabbed at the cut above her right ear. It was only midmorning. Hopefully, Katharine would be able to come tend to it soon. I needed to get to work; otherwise, I wouldn't have time to complete my work and Cecily's.

"I don't think he meant for me to hit my head," she said, her hand flexing in pain where it rested on the bed beside her.

I snorted in derision. "You mean he only meant to throw you to the floor? How gracious of him." I dipped the cloth in the basin of water sitting on her bedside table. Mrs. Thornton assured us the cut wasn't as bad as it looked, but I was still having a difficult time hiding my worry.

"He told me my work still isn't up to the standards of the house and that I would never make a living working."

"Then how does he expect you to live?"

"He told me to find a man. 'You're plenty old. Find someone willing to marry you. Anyone,'" she mimicked in a low, condescending tone.

I shook my head. "Your work is just as good as anyone else's," I said, baffled. "Why you? Why must he make your life miserable?"

She winced as I pressed a dry cloth to the cut, holding pressure. "I wish I knew."

There was a quick knock on the door, and Katharine came in, carrying her little box of supplies. She was in charge of the stillroom and was the closest thing we had to a healer here at Fowler House. I left Cecily in her capable hands and went in search of the housekeeper yet again.

I rapped my knuckles on her door. "Mrs. Thornton?"

"Come in."

I entered to find the housekeeper pacing her office. The sight made me stop in my tracks. Mrs. Thornton did not pace. She was decisive and determined, but she never let anyone see her fret. I didn't know she was capable of it. I blinked several

times before finding my voice. "Are you well?"

She stopped her pacing, her back to me as she faced the fireplace. Her fingers drummed where they rested on her hips. Finally, she spun to face me, her expression hard but wary. "I have decided something must be done."

My brow shot up. "About Cecily?"

She gave one curt nod. "After the incident last week, I reached out to my cousin. She keeps house in Murrwood and has agreed to take Cecily on."

A bundle of feelings tangled inside me. Relief and hope at the prospect of Cecily going somewhere she would be safe. Sadness at the realization that I would be separated from one of the people I cared most about. "But," I couldn't help arguing, "why does she have to go? You know what he's doing to her. When the family returns—"

"I've already tried." Her lips pressed tight with fury. "I've spoken with Lady Calderon about his behavior in the past. She says I'm being ridiculous, making up stories because I feel threatened by Brunson. I told her that was true. I do feel threatened, and I don't like him interfering with my charge over the maids. She simply advised me not to let my pride cost me my job." Her expression and stance spoke loudly of her indignation.

Hope sank out of me, but eventually, I swallowed down the chaos and forced myself to look on the bright side. "But you found another position for Cecily?"

She nodded.

"Good. Good. How will she get there? When will she go?"

She drummed her fingers on her hips a few more times. "Tonight," she said. "I've made arrangements."

"Why tonight?"

"We cannot let that man know she's leaving."

My concern increased. "Why?"

She shook her head. "Call it a hunch, but I don't think he'd let her go easily."

Her assertion left me flummoxed. "He's practically insisting she leave. Why would he care if she did exactly that?"

"His treatment of her is too pointed. He has fixated on her. It's almost obsessive. And he made a comment to me that Cecily was too pretty not to be married. Almost as if..."

Almost as if *he* wanted her for himself. My stomach churned at the thought. How twisted.

Mrs. Thornton shook that thought away. "Perhaps I am overreacting. Perhaps he wouldn't care, but what if she tries to leave in the light of day and he *does* care?" The weight of her words dragged my shoulders down.

She was right, of course. Brunson's treatment of Cecily was nonsensical, so better to be overly cautious than foolish.

Keeping my focus for the rest of the day was difficult. I was anxious, knowing that while Cecily was supposedly free to go, we could not trust that Brunson would not do something rash if he found out. He could prevent her from going. He could punish those who helped her. He could discover where she was going and try to ruin her reputation with her new employers.

We had to take care. And so I worked tirelessly to finish all that needed to be done, and when the moon rose and sleep settled over the house, I climbed from my bed and knelt beside Cecily's, giving her shoulder a shake.

"Cecily. Wake up. We must go."

She jerked awake, panicked, then immediately put a hand to the cut on her head. She took several slow breaths before asking, "Go where?"

"Mrs. Thornton has found another position for you."

She rolled her head on her pillow so she could look at me. "What are you talking about?"

"You can't stay here. I can't keep watching him hurt you. You and I have been through too much to allow that beast of a man to best you."

Her eyes widened. "So we're leaving?"

My heart sank a little. "No, not us. You," I said as tears pricked at my eyes. "You are going to Murrwood."

"Why?" she asked, pushing herself up. The way her braid tumbled over her shoulder and her eyes blinked with recent sleep made her look young, innocent, and vulnerable.

"Mrs. Thornton's cousin keeps a house there and she needs good help. You'll be safe there."

"But you can't come?" she asked, a tremble in her voice as she swung her legs from under the covers.

I shook my head. "I have to stay close to my family." As much as I thought of Cecily as a younger sister, I had two real younger sisters of my own who needed all the help I could give them. I'd finally made it back to Tethurn, and nothing would convince me to abandon my family again.

"What if Brunson hurts you?" she asked. It was sweet of her to worry, but we all knew that Cecily had received the brunt of his savagery.

"He can try," I said with more bravado than I actually felt.

Cecily's gaze studied mine in the dim light, then she closed her eyes, and twin tears slipped down her cheeks.

"Come," I said. "We must hurry."

It didn't take long for us both to dress. I covered my straight blonde hair with a kerchief, and Cecily coiled her braid and pinned it to the back of her head. I helped her to gather what little she had, and we made our way silently through the house, my hand gripping hers fiercely. We met Mrs. Thornton at the kitchen door, and then the three of us made our way outside and through the gardens. Mrs. Thornton clutched a bundle of food in her arms as she led the way through the trees, and Cecily peppered her with questions.

"What about the other maids?" she asked again.

"I'll keep an eye on everything," Mrs. Thornton promised, "but he's only ever targeted you, and I won't stand for it any longer. I was hoping things would get better, but I'm not willing to wait around and see."

We kept on through the trees until we met up with the road.

"There," she said, pointing to a wagon loaded down with crates and trunks. We all hurried in that direction.

A man separated himself from the shadowed outline of the wagon and came our way. He touched the brim of his hat as we approached. "Madam," he greeted Mrs. Thornton.

"Mr. Turner, thank you for coming."

"Happy to help if we can." He looked at Cecily and me. "Which one of you ladies is coming with us?"

"I am," Cecily said in a small voice.

"Well, best get to it." He gestured toward the wagon, and as we approached I saw a woman sitting on the bench, holding the horses' reins. She gave an encouraging smile, which eased a great deal of the worry in my heart.

Cecily wept as she hugged me one last time, but I managed to keep my eyes dry. I could be strong for her. I'd felt fiercely protective of her ever since we'd met,

which was why I had to send her elsewhere. Brunson wouldn't stop. So we were ending this—now.

The wheels creaked as the wagon pulled away, rumbling down the road with only the moonlight to guide it. Mrs. Thornton and I stood arm in arm, waiting until it had disappeared into the night.

She rubbed my arm. "She'll be all right," she assured me. "She's a strong one."

"Yes, she is."

We turned toward the house and made our way back through the trees and gardens.

"Thank you, Mrs. Thornton. Thank you for protecting her."

She stopped to look at me, lifting her nose a bit. "If I can't protect the girls who work for me, I'm not much of a housekeeper, am I?"

I smiled, knowing that not everyone took their duties so personally.

"Come along, Annabelle. Let's get some sleep." She nodded her head toward the house. "There's always plenty of work in the morning."

"You go. I'll be in soon."

It was only after she went inside that I let my tears fall. Sending Cecily off into the unknown was painful, but in those moments, I cried more for myself. Tethurn was my home, and returning here had represented hope and a new start, yet now Cecily was gone, and instead of finding my father and sisters healthy and thriving when I had returned six months ago, I'd found my father's health deteriorating and my sisters desperate for help.

I was good at helping, but with Cecily gone, I was frightened of what Brunson might do when he found her missing. I'd just have to hope he never found out the part I had played, because if he did, I had no doubt he'd see me fired, and where would that leave me? My family counted on me, and with my father's health worsening by the day, it was essential that I keep my income.

I dashed the tears from my cheeks and turned back toward the house. As I did, my heart sank. The house, which had been entirely dark before now, had one window that was brightly lit. And against the light, there was the outline of a man, looking out the window.

My breath caught in my chest as panic swept in. I was certain that it was Brunson.

But as I continued to look, I saw that this man was taller and leaner. And the lit window was not Brunson's. In fact, as I quickly counted the windows, I became convinced that this particular window belonged to the room assigned to the estate steward.

Would Mr. Pennsworth recognize me? Would he say something? He was a reasonable man, and if I spoke to him tomorrow, perhaps he would be made to understand my side of things.

It was essential that I not lose this job.

“HAS ANYONE SEEN Mr. Pennsworth?” I asked as I finished eating my breakfast with several other staff members. I’d decided I needed to be proactive, strike while the iron was hot. I couldn’t just wait and worry that the steward would mention my odd nighttime wandering. I would be upfront and honest and hope for the best.

“He’s gone,” the cook said.

“What do you mean, gone?”

“Left a couple weeks ago. Hadn’t you noticed?”

“No.” I had so few interactions with the steward and was so focused on my work that not seeing the man for weeks on end was completely normal.

“Well, he’s gone,” the cook continued. “Said he was too old and tired and deserved to die in peace.”

“Was he ill?” I asked in alarm.

The cook laughed. “Not at all. He was just ready to retire.”

“So we have no steward?” Then who had been looking out of the steward’s room last night?

“Not to worry. Lord Calderon hired a new man before the family left for Winhaven.”

He had? “I’ve not seen a new steward about,” I said to myself.

Mara let out a little giggle beside me. “He doesn’t look like a steward. This one is handsome.”

“And young,” added Livvy from across the table.

My brow shot up. “How young?” I was nineteen, and both these girls were only a year or two younger.

“Twenty-five, maybe? Can’t be more than thirty,” Livvy suggested.

“Either way,” the cook called over to us with a stern look, “he deserves our respect.”

“Of course, ma’am,” Livvy said and turned her attention back to her plate.

“Yes, ma’am,” Mara agreed but then leaned close to whisper, “but I can still admire his pretty blue eyes.”

Suddenly, a horrible thought occurred to me, and I froze for several moments. Then I swallowed hard. “Have any new footmen been hired recently?”

The cook and both the maids shook their heads. “Not that I know of,” Livvy said.

Oh dear. If there were no new footmen, and the new steward was young...and blue-eyed...

*Foolish!* I chastised myself. The night Cecily had been hurt, it was the new steward who I’d ordered about. I should have known better than to make assumptions, especially when I was giving out orders. How humiliating. I was lucky he’d been so affable about the situation. But then...now what? Mr. Pennsworth I had known. I would have been comfortable asking him not to mention my middle-of-the-night wandering to anyone. But a brand-new, young steward who likely listened to and respected Brunson and his authority? Yes, he’d been kind and helpful with Cecily, but the butler’s grip on the workings of this manor were strong. It was probably best just to avoid him.

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After finishing in Willa's room, I was on my way to dust the master bedroom when footsteps sounded from up ahead. I looked up to see the new steward walking toward me. The same steward whom I had forced to help me with Cecily and who had likely seen me out in the yard in the middle of the night.

I dropped my gaze to the floor and hurried my step.

"Excuse me, miss," he said before I could pass him by.

I stopped and forced my gaze to meet his. "Yes, sir?"

"I'm sorry. I did not ask your name during our last meeting."

I blinked, surprised by his friendly solicitousness. "It's Annabelle, sir."

"Annabelle," he said with a small smile that made me notice how expressive his face was. Bright blue eyes under a shock of curly hair. "I'm Nicolai Closs."

"Yes. I know..." I yanked my dignity back around myself. "You are the new steward." The other maids had been right. He was young and handsome.

"I am."

"You didn't mention that the other night," I said, but he only gave me a half-smile that made him look quite boyish. "You're not old enough to be a steward," I said and immediately regretted it.

Now his mouth turned up in a full smile. "The master of the house disagrees with you."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean..." I shook my head, embarrassed over the entire situation. "If I had known, I would not have been ordering you about. That was not my place. I apologize, but I had no idea—"

He waved my words away. "Your friend needed help."

"I know, but—" I pulled a hand down my face. "I apologize nonetheless. I promise it won't happen again."

His brow rose. "You do realize I'm not reprimanding you?"

"Perhaps not, but..." There was really nothing to say. "Forgive me, sir. I should return to my duties." I dropped into a curtsy and turned to go, hoping that would be the end of it.

"A moment, Annabelle?" he said before I'd gone three steps.

I turned back reluctantly. "Yes?"

"I have to ask. Last night"—my heart jumped into my throat—"why were you outside?"

I felt the blood drain from my face. "I wasn't," I lied, which was stupid of me because I was a terrible liar.

His brow furrowed. "You were."

I swallowed but then said crisply, "Right. So I was. But it was nothing." If I acted like nothing was amiss, then perhaps he would think he was reading too much into the situation.

"Nothing?" he asked, seeming almost amused by my attempt at lies.

"Nothing at all," I affirmed.

"I see." He clearly did not see, but he seemed curious, which was better than angry, I supposed. "The reason I ask is because the butler, Brunton—"

"Brunson," I corrected.

"Yes, of course. Brunson has asked that I look into the disappearance of one of the maids."

I froze. Brunson was looking for Cecily? Already? And why?

"And as I've thought on it," he continued, "I think you might know something about that."

I held my silence. He hadn't actually asked me a question, and the last thing I needed was to go blabbering on.

"Normally I would tell Brunson about seeing you last night, but if there is some reason—"

"Please don't tell him," I said, my voice smaller than it should have been.

His eyes narrowed in concern. "Why?"

He seemed like a good person, so if I told him some of the truth... "She was not safe here. She *had* to go."

"Go where?"

I lifted my chin. I could be stubborn if it meant protecting those I loved. "I won't tell you that."

This seemed to increase his curiosity. "Is she the same girl who was hurt the other day?"

I looked about, hoping to find the right answer in the carpet, but it was silent as usual, so I had to follow my intuition. "Yes."

"Is she safe now?"

I relaxed a little, sensing his genuine concern for Cecily's well-being. "Yes. Much safer than she was here."

He seemed alarmed by my words. That was good. He should be. "You said his temper came out around your friend. Did he have something to do with her injury?"

My jaw twitched as I debated what to say. Finally, after a shaky breath, I said, "Yes."

His nostrils flared. "And you? Are you safe here? Should I be concerned for the other maids?"

Gracious. *Protective* looked good on Mr. Closs. I shook my head to answer his question, though my answer confused even me. "No, sir. It was only her."

He tapped his middle finger against his outer thigh, seeming to debate before asking, "And what should I tell the butler?"

I chewed on my lip before answering. "Tell him you don't know anything. You're new. How can you be expected to know more than he does? You are not in charge of the indoor staff."

He was silent, considering for several moments. "True," he conceded. "Still, I don't like to lie."

My heart sank. "Then tell him she found work elsewhere, and you don't know where. That's all true." His brow was still furrowed, and I felt the need to press the issue, but all that would come out was, "Please?" with a tremble in my voice. "Please. It's important."

He studied me, perhaps trying to decide if he could trust me, or if his job was worth the lie, before finally speaking. "Very well," he conceded. "I will trust your experience. Thank you, Annabelle."

Relief swept over me. "Thank you, sir," I said with fervency. Then I curtsied and left, determined not to give him time to change his mind.

He didn't call after me this time, and I was left to hope that he was a man of his word.

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The Calderons were still away, and after Cecily's disappearance, Brunson had become more of a tyrant with each passing day. Despite the family's absence, he insisted that the entire house be cleaned, dusted, and scrubbed every day. He was horribly short-tempered and would snap without provocation. When Mara fell ill eight days after Cecily left, she tried to hide it, but when I found her walking slowly

down the corridor with her hand resting against the wall for balance, I knew something had to be done.

I guided her forcefully back to her room, asking a footman to fetch Katharine.

"Don't worry about your work," I said as Katharine and I helped Mara into her bed.

"Are you certain?" she asked.

"Of course I am," I soothed. Her flushed cheeks and glassy eyes told me she was in no shape to be working. "I'll do what needs to be done, and you'll get the rest you need."

She blew out a breath, seeming to finally accept the help. "Thank you, Annabelle." She lay back and let Katharine pull the covers over her.

"You're welcome." I left and went above stairs, my steps quick as I set about the task of accomplishing both my own chores as well as hers. Luckily, Mara had been able to work the first half of the day, so it was only her afternoon chores I would have to take on. I made my way through the sitting room and drawing room, trying to be efficient and methodical. Perhaps I should have asked Livvy to help, but I hated to impose on anyone else, and I knew from experience that I could do it myself even if it wore me down.

After finishing with those, I pushed through the door to the steward's office and came to an abrupt halt. The fire was still lit, the lamps still burned, and Mr. Closs was still at his desk.

I must have made some sort of noise, or perhaps he just sensed my presence, because he looked up and caught my gaze.

Mr. Closs had been here for a full month, but I had doggedly avoided him since he'd asked me about Cecily.

Now, with his gaze caught on mine and the tiredness seeping into my bones, I didn't have the energy to pretend, so I just dropped my gaze. "I beg your pardon, sir. I'll come back later." I dipped a curtsey and turned.

"Wait a moment," he called.

My shoulders dropped a bit, but I couldn't very well ignore him, so I turned around, clasping my hands in front of me. "Sir?"

He was standing now with his hand outstretched. He seemed to realize his hand still hovered there and dropped it. Then he tugged on the bottom of his vest, glancing around the disarray of his office as though it made him uncomfortable, and then straightened. "May I help you?" he asked. "You must have come here for a reason."

I dropped my gaze. "Mara is ill. I'm just helping her."

"Mara?" he asked, sounding confused.

I glanced up. "The maid who usually tends to your office, sir."

"Of course," he said, though I doubted he'd had the time to learn the names and faces of all the staff. "So you are doing her work?"

I nodded. "I will come back later when I won't be disturbing you." That would make things easier on me. I wouldn't be distracted, wondering what he was thinking of me, or worrying that he would ask about Cecily, or wondering why he normally kept his curly hair tamed and controlled when it looked so good mussed.

I started backing out the door, but he stopped me again. "No need to come back later," he said in a rush. "Mara regularly tidies while I'm still working, and that's never been a disturbance. I trust you can do the same. In fact—" He started sifting through the mess on his desk, digging through the mound of papers and then pulling a small plate from underneath it all. "Here you are," he said, holding it out.



I blinked, surprised that he was being so awkwardly helpful. But I quickly rallied and crossed to his desk to take the proffered plate, which had some cake crumbs and half a cookie left on it. It seemed Mr. Closs enjoyed his sweets. "Thank you, I'll be quick," I assured him as I backed away and hurried to set the plate on an abandoned tray covered with various dishes sitting on a chair nearby. Clearly, this man preferred to work through mealtimes. Or perhaps he was having a difficult time making heads or tails of things when the lord of the manor was not in residence. Odd, that.

Mr. Closs retook his seat and focused on his work, his head bent over the ledger he was poring over. As I straightened and dusted, I could hear the dip and scrape of his quill as he worked.

After I'd finished everything that I could in the rest of the room, all that was left was his desk. The scratching of the quill had stopped, and now he was just staring at the figures, either completely stumped or lost in thought. I didn't want to disturb him, but the cup of tea resting precariously close to the edge of the desk with a ledger pushing up against it should not be ignored, and I needed to finish with this room before I moved on.

I took a bracing breath and stepped to the side of his desk. "Sir?"

He jumped, and his eyes darted to mine. "Yes?"

"My apologies," I said as heat rose to my cheeks, "but were you finished with this?" I indicated the cup of tea.

"Yes, thank you."

I picked it up. "And was there a fork with that plate you gave me earlier, or..."

"Oh, yes." He started rearranging things, and so I stepped up to help, organizing things into neat piles, lining up his waxes and seals, and finding the fork along the way.

"Can you read?"

"Hm?" I glanced up at Mr. Closs, who wore a puzzled frown, and then back down at the desk. "Oh. No. I just match up the papers that are folded like this," I said, gesturing to the pile that I assumed was correspondence, "and the papers with the symbol at the top." I pointed to the documents that looked more official. "And these obviously go together," I said about the bound ledger books. "Was I right?" I asked, a bit amused that he thought something as simple as sorting like items would be beyond my capacity just because I couldn't read.

His brow was still furrowed. "You were, but..."

I stopped moving things and tucked my hands behind my back instead. Maybe he didn't want me touching his things. Maybe I was overstepping. I did that sometimes. I always wanted to be helpful, but sometimes what I saw as helpful wasn't.

"I don't believe that's part of your responsibility," he said, and the kindness in his face eased the worry that had started to rise up.

Still, he may not wish for my help. "I suppose I just thought it would be easier for you."

"It would, but you are already doing Mara's work in addition to your own," he said with a softness in his eyes that made me think he was looking out for me. "And I'd hate to add to your workload."

I blinked, realizing he was right. My compulsive need to be helpful was adding to my workload unnecessarily. I needed to move on, so despite the way my hands itched to continue fixing the chaos of his desk, I took a step back and cast my eyes about. "Yes, I suppose I have enough to be getting on with." So then, why did I hesitate to leave? There was something about being in this space, and in his

presence, that was soothing. Even though he made me a little nervous, he also made me feel safe. Still, I'd dawdled long enough, so I quickly picked up the fork I had unearthed and went to add it to the tray that sat on the chair.

I looked around, taking a moment to straighten a few books on his shelves, and then took the tray with me as I left.

The door was mostly closed, and I heard Mr. Closs stand, perhaps to open it for me, but I quickly hooked my foot in the crack and pulled it open so that there was no need for him to move.

As I stepped forward, though, my way was blocked by Brunson. I jerked to a stop, my chest immediately tightening with unease. "Beg your pardon," I said, dipping my head low and stepping aside so that he could come in and I could go out.

He was silent and still for several moments before he said, "I hope you aren't disrupting Mr. Closs."

"No, sir. I—"

"She's been no bother at all," Mr. Closs said in my defense, his tone matter-of-fact. "I was grateful for her quick work."

"Very well," Brunson said and stepped to the side. "On your way."

I started down the hallway, half expecting the butler to follow and reprimand me, but after several steps, I realized I'd left my dusting rags and broom just outside Mr. Closs's office door. I set the tray down on the floor and rushed back to gather them. As I bent to pick them up, Mr. Closs spoke from inside.

"Did you need something?"

I froze, crouched just outside the door, wondering if he was talking to me.

But then Brunson answered. "Of course not, sir," he said with what sounded like feigned respect. "Only a word of caution. It's best not to encourage the maids."

My eyes widened, knowing that any mention of maids from Brunson was not likely to be complimentary.

There was a heavy beat of silence and then, "Encourage them?" Mr. Closs asked.

"These young girls will fall for a man the moment they see him coming. They're flighty and tend to get themselves into trouble," Brunson said as though it were a friendly warning and not an insult to every girl that worked in this house, myself included. "Wouldn't want you being caught up in such things."

My nostrils flared, but I forced myself to carefully gather my supplies and then stood, desperately curious to hear what Mr. Closs would say but dreading it as well.

When he did speak, his voice was angry and cutting. "I'm afraid you and I don't see eye to eye on this subject. I've seen more young *men* get into trouble than young women." It sounded like a dismissal, so I treaded carefully back to the tray I had left, worried that Brunson would come out and catch me eavesdropping. I glanced back just before I rounded the corner and saw Brunson backing out of the office.

Despite Brunson's ill opinion of my kind, my heart was warmed by Mr. Closs's firm rebuttal of the butler's opinion.

THE HARD LINE of Brunson's mouth combined with the haughty lift of his brow and glint of pleasure in his gaze was an expression with which I was familiar. He'd just never directed it at me before. I'd only ever seen him use it with Cecily, but now Cecily was gone, and my heart pounded with the awful realization that he was going to make my life miserable.

He held up the decorative jewelry box that usually sat on Willa's dressing table. The corner of the lid was dented and mangled. "You are in charge of the family's bedchambers, are you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"And how do you suppose we deal with the ruination of the family's prized possessions?"

I blinked and gaped, unable to come up with an answer I believed he wanted.

Mrs. Thornton stood just behind and to the side of Brunson, her hands clenched tightly over her apron, her expression half fear, half anger. "Accidents happen, you know that," she said to the butler. "But we've never punished the staff for it."

He spared the housekeeper only a brief, disdainful glance. "Yes, and it seems they've become more careless because of it. Perhaps this will be a good reminder to treat the Calderons' belongings with the respect they deserve."

He turned back to me. "Since you broke the item, the five coppers required to fix it will come out of your wages."

"But I didn't break it," I argued, horrified. Five coppers was nearly half a week's wages, and it was vital that I take home every coin I earned. Most of my compensation came in the form of my room and board. But those extra coppers meant the world to my family.

Brunson's eyes narrowed. "Six coppers then, for your insolence."

My mouth dropped open, but I forced it shut and held my tongue. I was not going to change his mind, and any more arguing would no doubt result in more money lost.

I pressed my lips, but my chin trembled. It was so unfair.

Brunson smiled. "I'm glad to see that these consequences are having an impact. You are excused."

My eyes flitted to Mrs. Thornton, but she looked equal parts helpless and enraged. She wanted to help me but couldn't. The more Brunson grasped for power, the more Lady Calderon had given it to him. It seemed that after growing up with him as her own butler, Lady Calderon saw him almost as a father figure, someone who would do no wrong. So instead of Brunson and Mrs. Thornton working in tandem, Brunson had assumed authority over her and thus over the maids and other female servants. This was not how it was meant to be.

I turned and left, my mind churning as I considered the difficult position this would put my family in. In the six months I'd been back in Tethurn, they'd gotten used to relying on me. My sisters worked hard knitting and selling socks and other wares, but in addition to his failing health, my father had had an accident shortly before I'd returned to Tethurn and hadn't been able to work regularly since. Each time I had a day off and went to visit them, he seemed more and more despondent.

The injury to his leg was healing, but the lack of balance which he said had caused the accident persisted, and if he didn't find a way to resume smithing soon, I feared for what my sisters would have to do.

At least I had work. But if Brunson continued to garnish my wages, what could I do?

I resolved to keep my head down and, if possible, avoid the vindictive butler. If he never saw me, perhaps he would forget I existed.

I returned to the upper floor where I had been cleaning when Brunson had found me and demanded I follow him to the kitchens. I looked around, getting my bearings, and decided it was a good day to clean the rug that ran the length of the corridor. I rolled it up and dragged it outside, pretending for a few vengeful moments that it was Brunson's dead body.

I was a horrid person for thinking such things, but he had deeply hurt my friend and was now tormenting me, so I decided I had a right to be horrid.

After dragging it outside, I enlisted a footman to help me hang the rug over a line in the yard and proceeded to beat it with all my might. There was something cathartic about hitting something as hard as I could and hearing the satisfying *thwap* that accompanied it—especially when I imagined Brunson's sneering face in the center of the rug.

When I heard a tentative "Miss?" from behind me, I flinched and spun around, breathing hard from exertion and no doubt red-faced with anger.

It was Mr. Closs, and he was looking at me curiously. After a few moments of stunned silence, I remembered my manners and dipped into a respectful curtsy. "Sir."

"Are you all right?" he asked, seeming genuinely concerned.

If my face hadn't been red already, it would have been now. I hadn't been beating the rug in a normal way. I had been beating it in a fierce, grunting-with-anger kind of way that had probably looked more than a little unsettling. I swiped at my forehead, pushing the loose hairs out of my face. "I'm well enough."

"Good," he said, though he didn't move along. He kept looking at me with concern and curiosity.

I fidgeted, my hands twisting around the handle of the rug beater, wondering why he lingered. "Can I do anything for you?"

His mouth quirked up. "I feel like I should be asking you that."

His friendly, open manner surprised me just as much as his words. I was a servant. I did for others. Others did not do for me. I scrunched my brow in confusion and shook my head. "What are you doing out here?"

"I was meeting with the day laborers that we've hired to help with the harvest."

"I see." Lies. I didn't understand why he had stopped to speak with me or why he had not left.

He gestured toward the rug. "Do you find that to be good practice?"

My eyes skipped to the rug then back to him, confused. "Practice for what?"

He gave a casual shrug. "Fending off adoring suitors?"

I stared, wide-eyed, wondering if he was serious.

"No?" he asked. "Then perhaps beating off your enemies?"

A laugh burst past my lips, and I slapped my palm over my mouth. It was strange hearing that sound coming from my mouth. When had I last laughed? I couldn't remember the last time someone had teased me. It had been months.

His brow rose, and his eyes twinkled. "That's it, isn't it? You pretend to be the sedate maid, but really you are an avenging angel."

I dropped my hand, allowing my smile to peek out. He was wrong, of course. I could never be brave enough to avenge anyone or anything.

"Don't worry," he said with a wink. "Your secret is safe with me."

I shook my head, but my smile wouldn't abate. "You're ridiculous."

"But you didn't say I was wrong," he said with a smirky twist of his mouth. "So tell me, whose face were you imagining as you bludgeoned that rug? Was it perhaps a certain stiff butler who thinks too much of himself and has the perpetual look of smelling something sour?"

A bit of me was alarmed that he would so easily see through me, but his good humor put me at ease, giving me the courage to tease him in return. "I'll never tell," I said.

His cheeks twitched, like he was glad to be teased. "Well, I'm certain he deserves whatever thrashing you give him."

If only that were true. "I'm afraid the scales will never be balanced where he is concerned." My eyes widened when I realized what I'd said, and I clamped my lips shut.

But instead of looking affronted or doubtful, Mr. Closs looked intent. "Tell me." His voice was quiet, entreating.

I shook my head. "I should get back to work, sir."

His brow furrowed, like he was unhappy with me calling him sir, which was strange. I was being respectful. I was always respectful. "Annabelle," he began.

I cut him off. "I'm certain you have plenty of work to do as well." His voice was so soft, his face so open and inviting, that it was difficult to resist the urge to confide in him. I took a step back, trying to separate myself from the conversation.

One eyebrow lifted. "Are you trying to get rid of me?"

"Of course not." Did he want to stay? "I just assumed you had things to do."

"I have a few minutes, but if you would like me to leave you alone, I'll certainly respect that."

Did I want him to leave me alone?

No, not really. Not if he wanted to speak with me, but that brought on different questions. "Do you go around talking to all the maids?"

One eyebrow pulled up as if he didn't quite understand the question. "I'm hoping to learn the names of all the servants so that anyone will feel comfortable bringing their concerns to me. But no," he said as he rubbed the back of his neck, "I haven't been speaking with the other maids like this."

His answer was so thoroughly honest. It was disarming. "Why me?"

He gave a little shrug. "I feel like I know you a bit. And I was impressed with the way you helped and protected your friend. It reminded me of my sisters."

I smiled a little, liking the idea of the proud, steady man having a few sisters to boss him about. "I have sisters too."

His brow jumped, as though the idea made him happy. "How many?"

"Two."

"Ah, well, there I've got you beat. I have four. Two older, two younger, so I've been surrounded by females my whole life."

I studied him and couldn't help commenting, "It seems to have done you good."

He threw his head back and laughed. It was a big, bold, beautiful sound that made me want to smile. "My sisters would be thrilled to hear you say so." He chuckled and sighed. "But the truth is you're right. They did right by me, and I've done my best to do right by them."

That was something I understood all too well. "I try my best to do the same, but I worry it's not enough." I turned and took another small swing at the rug, worry

tugging at my brow, remembering that I wouldn't be able to help them as much this month.

"You know..." he said from behind me, and when I turned it was to see that he had sobered. "You can only do what you can do."

I shook my head. "There's always more I can do."

The way his brow furrowed made me think he'd taken me too seriously or that he was seeing too much.

"I should work," I said, my voice barely audible as I stared at the ground.

"Of course." Was that disappointment in his voice?

"Good day, sir."

I glanced up to see that he was frowning once again, but then he nodded. "Good day, Annabelle."

He walked away, and when I went back to beating the rug, it was with far less vitriol.

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We were paid on the first day of each month, and aside from Sunday mornings, which we had off so we could attend church, it was also our one day off in the month. Some servants would receive their wages in the morning and spend them by the time they returned in the evening, but most hoarded those coins for as long as they could manage, only spending them after careful thought and planning. Then there were a few like me, those of us who were grateful for a solid roof over our head and plenty of food in our bellies, who gladly gave our earnings to our family members who didn't have those things.

The steward's office had two doors, one that led into the corridor and one that led outside. It was convenient for these days when we would all line up to receive our compensation. It was September first, and the line stretched from Mr. Closs's desk and out into the hallway. We knew the order in which to stand, and when he would call the next name, we would step up to his desk, receive our wages, and then exit out the door that led outside. Most of us had a satchel and a traveling cloak with us, ready to be on our way the moment the coins were pocketed.

"Sunny Taylor," Mr. Closs called, and the woman just in front of me stepped forward.

Mr. Closs looked up with a small smile and dropped a pouch in her hands.

"Thank you for your work."

Sunny dipped a curtsy and left through the outer door.

"Annabelle Winters."

I stepped up and forced myself to look at him just like I had looked at Mr. Pennsworth, but it wasn't the same. The way Mr. Closs smiled at me was different from how he'd smiled at the others. I didn't know how or why, but it was.

"Thank you for your work," he repeated, dropping the pouch into my hand just like he did with everyone.

I curtsied and hurried out the door.

It wasn't until I was halfway home that I stopped in the shade and poured the contents of the pouch into my hand, already lamenting the loss of the six coppers that Brunson had held back.

I counted them up.

Then I counted them again.

"What?" I whispered to myself, dumbfounded. They were all there. The entirety of my monthly wage sat in my hand, no less than I received every month.

I didn't know why or how. Perhaps Brunson's threat had been empty, though that seemed unlikely. Or maybe there'd been a miscommunication. But what did it matter? Whatever the reason, it was a miracle.

My spine was a little straighter and my heart a little lighter as I walked the road home. I was anxious to check on my sisters and help where I could while I was at home. I had missed years of being with them when I'd been employed so far away in Norsing.

I'd returned here, believing that my new position and my proximity to my family would breathe new life into me. And in some ways, it had. But it had also brought me face to face with my family's circumstances.

When I drew close to our cottage, I hurried past the deserted smithy and the weed-covered garden beds. I opened the door with a smile fixed to my face. The least I could do was bring cheer with me. "Hello," I called.

Both of my sisters were sitting in the one main room, knitting needles in hand. Grace smiled at my arrival but didn't get up. Grace was seventeen and had always been the calm, steady one. Fourteen-year-old Charlotte, on the other hand, jumped up and ran over to hug me, her half-finished sock held carefully in one hand so that she didn't drop any stitches. "I missed you, Belle." It was what she always said.

And I always said the same thing in return. "Not as much as I missed you."

She pulled back and returned to her seat.

Charlotte, or Lottie as we called her, looked a lot like me. Same medium height, same blonde hair, but hers had curls, while mine was unapologetically straight. "How are things up at the big house?" Lottie asked. She always called Fowler House the big house. Lord Calderon was our landlord, but our little cottage was nothing at all compared to Fowler House. My father slept in the only bedroom, and my sisters slept in the small loft that jutted out along one wall of the main room.

"Same as usual, I suppose," I said as I put my bag down and started cleaning. The girls were always so busy making socks that cleaning was often the last thing to get done, so I'd taken it on.

"Surely there's more to say than that, Belle."

My eyes shifted to Grace. She was two years younger than I was, and she took after my father in looks, her hair dark and thick. Her head was bent over her knitting, and several loose locks hung down, blocking her face from my view.

There *was* more I could say. There was always more I could say, but it felt wrong to bring my troubles here. So what could I say that wouldn't be a burden? "There is a new steward," I said.

"That's nice," Grace said, though she didn't actually seem interested.

We all knew that we were avoiding the questions I really needed to ask. So I sucked in a breath and dove in. "How's Papa's leg?" I asked with tentative hope.

"It's healed well, but his balance..." Her hands shook the slightest bit as they worked the needles.

"How is it?"

Grace looked up, her emotions shuttered. "Worse."

I shut my eyes and dropped my chin, feeling the terrible weight of that word.

"He's only been able to take a few jobs over the past month, and he fell during his last one."

My hope blew away like smoke.

We all looked to the door leading to my father's room. He'd always been a little clumsy. Some of my first memories were of him tripping over something and laughing it off. He'd always laughed it off. That had been his way, the essence of who my father was. But over the years, my sisters had noticed the steady increase in

accidents. They'd tried not to worry, since nothing truly terrible ever came of it. But over the last year...by the time I came back to Tethurn, the change was so drastic that I knew something was terribly wrong. He couldn't keep his balance even when he was standing still, and he would often lose his grip on things he was holding. It was a bad situation for anyone, but Papa was a blacksmith—or at least, he used to be. It wasn't safe for him to be around forges and hot pokers and hammers anymore. So he picked up whatever spare jobs people had. Fixing fences or mending cabinets...anything. The money wasn't half of what he'd made as a blacksmith, but it had been something.

Then, several months ago, he'd stopped laughing off his accidents. It wasn't just that he realized how serious it was; he himself seemed to be changing. And certainly, people changed all the time, but not like he did. It happened over only a few weeks, my sisters had said. I only saw my family once a month, on my day off. When I'd arrived here in Tethurn, his balance was concerning, but he was still my ever-optimistic and affectionate father. Then two months later, his mood and temper was so volatile that he was a dazed daydreamer one moment and a hot-tempered tyrant the next.

"I've spoken to everyone I can think of," Grace said, the movement of her hands becoming stiff and stilted. "Doctors, healers, apothecaries."

"What do they say?"

Her hands finally paused, and she looked me in the eye. "There's nothing to be done."

My whole body felt suddenly cold. "What do you mean, nothing to be done? Surely—"

"None of them have any suggestions for treatment, and even if they did, we couldn't afford it." Grace's voice trembled, and her hands started knitting again. "They're calling it a sickness of the mind."

"Better than what the townspeople say," Lottie said from her corner.

I turned to her. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing," Grace said, sending Lottie a censoring look. "They're just being cruel. They say he's possessed. That he has a devil in him."

I wanted to roll my eyes at the ridiculousness of it, but I was too hurt.

I supposed it didn't much matter what we called it. The facts remained: our father seemed to have disappeared, leaving us to fend for ourselves, and we never knew when he would have a clearheaded day that would allow him to function normally.

"He could still get better." Charlotte's quiet words were barely audible. She didn't bother looking up but raised a shoulder as she said, "They don't know everything. They don't even know what his sickness is. He could get better."

"We'll hope for that," I said, but I didn't believe it. Grace was thorough. She would not have told me there was nothing to be done unless she'd been truly convinced of it.

I couldn't take the melancholy anymore, so I got to work straightening and cleaning the cottage, humming as I went. Even after things were tidy, I kept going, cleaning under and around everything. I even dusted the tiny stack of books that had belonged to my mother. She'd been able to read, and she'd promised all of us that we would learn someday. But life was busy, and none of us had been all that interested in learning. And then she'd died.

As I flipped through the books, missing my mother, a piece of parchment fell out from between the pages. As I opened it, I had the fanciful dream that it might be a letter she'd written, and I wondered who I could bring it to to discover its



contents. But it wasn't a letter from my mother. It looked very official, like something I would have found on Mr. Closs's desk. And the mark on the top of the page was one I recognized all too well.

I turned to my sisters. "What is this?" I asked, holding up the very official-looking parchment.

Grace looked caught, and my eyes narrowed. "I recognize this symbol," I said pointing to the little picture at the top of the paper. "This is the Calderon seal," I said, befuddled.

Lottie leaned forward, then her brow raised like she recognized it. "Someone from the big house came down and brought us that notice."

"What? When?"

Grace held out a placating hand. "Before you came here from Norsing, we were behind on the lease payments. But things have been fine since you returned."

I looked around at the empty cottage, the lack of any extra comforts, and it all made sense. I'd been hoping that Grace was saving the money that I brought each month, but no. "Does all the money go to the lease?"

"Not all. Just most of it."

"That's why you two haven't stopped knitting since I walked in the door?"

"We're lucky," she said, avoiding the question. "The housekeeper over at the Gelder estate has asked us to deliver an order to her every month. And people know us at the market. The more we can make, the better off we'll be. And with Papa's few odd jobs, and your wage, we can make it work." She was trying to sound so sure, but she knew the situation better than I did, and we both knew how quickly things could—and probably would—change. If Papa stopped being able to do jobs, where would that leave us?

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The creak of the door alerted my father to my presence. He looked up from his chair by the window and squinted. "Lottie, is that you?"

I swallowed. "Papa, it's me, Annabelle."

"Oh, hello, my dear. I'm afraid I can't see well in this dim light."

I frowned. Sunlight poured through his window. "It's a lovely day out." I came to stand beside him.

Instead of agreeing with me, he gave a rather melancholy sigh. "I suppose it is."

"How is your balance today?"

"Fine," he said. "I was able to walk down to old Malcom's place and help him with the thatching on his roof."

I pressed my lips and closed my eyes. He was lying. Either that or he thought that the help he had rendered to Malcom more than a month ago had happened just this morning. I couldn't argue with him, though. He'd either become sad or angry if I corrected him, so instead I said, "I'm sure he appreciated it."

"Malcom is a good fellow. I'm happy to help where I can."

"Have you put any more thought into how else you might help our neighbors? It might be good to pick up a hobby that you can do here while you enjoy the view out your window."

He grunted. "Like what?"

"What if you were to make some good, strong leather straps?" He was good with his hands, and braiding rope would put no one in danger if his hands started to seize up.

He turned to me, but his eyes wouldn't focus. "Where would we get the leather, Belle?"

I breathed carefully before making my next suggestions. “You have plenty of good leather aprons out in the smithy.”

His brow furrowed, and his frown was deep.

“If you wanted to practice making harnesses and the like, you could cut up your aprons so that you wouldn’t—”

“Why would I cut up my good aprons?” he demanded, his voice going hard.

I thought about dropping the subject, but the lease notice weighed heavy on my mind. “Papa, if you aren’t going to use them again—”

“Who says I’m not going to use them again? I’m a smithy. One of the best in the area.”

“Please, Papa.” The fear in my voice was so thick. “When is the last time you were able to smith anything?”

“I’ve had enough of this.” He pushed to his feet and tossed a hand toward the door. “Stop pestering me, Lottie. I told you—”

“It’s Annabelle, Papa.” I reached for him, worried he might topple.

“Annabelle is gone. She’s been gone for years. I don’t want to speak of Annabelle.”

A sharp breath hissed through my teeth.

He fell back into his chair without incident, which was good because I was so shocked and hurt that I wouldn’t have been able to help if he had fallen. He slumped into his chair and went back to staring out the window.

He had nothing else to say to me. He didn’t even believe I was here.

I left shortly after and cried on my way back to Fowler House.

THE LORD AND lady of the manor returned the first week of September. I found myself scowling at their return, wondering if Cecily had stayed, would the Calderons have made things right? Would they have believed Cecily, a new employee, not yet tried and tested? Or would they have trusted their butler who had been serving them for years? I didn't like any of the answers I came up with, because none of them changed the past.

The family had been back for three days, and I knew that Lady Calderon and Willa would be leaving mid-morning. I was anxious to access their rooms as soon as possible, so I went up to see if they'd left. I climbed the servants' stairs at the back of the house and saw Lady Calderon and Willa standing just outside Willa's bedchamber. Today must have been one of the days when Lady Calderon did not approve of Willa's appearance. She did that on occasion, deciding her daughter's appearance wasn't up to snuff and sending her back to change her gloves or her stockings or something else. Sometimes, she forced Willa to change multiple times before she would inevitably sigh and declare, "I suppose that will have to do," and off they would go.

It was no different today. Willa, being eleven and surprisingly unruffled by her mother's disapproval, went through the motions of changing her bonnet and choosing a different brooch before her mother approved and led the way to the main staircase. Willa turned to look at me where I stood by the servants' stairs and rolled her eyes before waving and rushing after her mother.

Willa took after her father in temperament. Not easily ruffled and always inclined to see the good and ignore the bad.

As I was dusting Willa's windowsill, I looked out on the grounds. The leaves were turning, and the greens were fading, replaced by browns and oranges. I could see the fields in the distance being harvested by laborers, and two men walked together, making their way from the fields to the house. As I looked closer, I realized it was Lord Calderon and Mr. Closs. No doubt the master and the new steward had much to discuss now that Lord Calderon had returned.

I pulled myself from the window, determined not to linger. I'd always prided myself on my focus and work ethic.

After finishing in Willa's room, I moved on to the master chamber. I made up the bed and was starting to dust when I heard Lord Calderon's booming voice coming down the hallway. "Don't know how I left without it."

I froze. Was he going to come in here? I never knew what to do in these situations. Should I ignore him? Should I stand against a wall and wait for him to leave? Excuse myself? I hadn't had enough interactions with Lord Calderon to know if he would want me to pretend I was invisible or just get out.

I panicked and stepped behind the drapes just before he entered the room. Then I winced, berating myself. This was an excellent way to cause suspicion.

"I know it's here somewhere," Lord Calderon murmured. He was probably talking to himself. "Ah, here it is," he declared.

I let out a little sigh of relief. Hopefully that meant he would depart.

"Now, I trust you have everything you need," Lord Calderon said as his footsteps moved closer to the doorway.

"I do, sir," another voice answered, and my anxiety swelled once more.

"Very well." I heard the sounds of him patting and fussing with his clothes, an absent-minded habit of his. "Good day, then."

"Good day," the other man said, and I had a sinking suspicion that I knew who it was. Lord Calderon and Mr. Closs had been walking toward the house earlier. I just had to hope that the steward would follow the master out of this chamber and leave me to my humiliation.

Unfortunately, only one set of footsteps retreated down the hallway. The other footsteps moved closer, and I held my breath.

"You can come out now," he said, his voice mild—and dare I say amused?

My shoulders drooped, and the drapes wiggled, but I didn't step out. Maybe he would think he was mistaken and move along.

"The master is gone, and you are in no trouble," he said, and I heard movement and then a creak.

It was no good. I was caught. I let out a huffy sigh and pulled the drapes back, stepping out from behind them with my head held high, even as a blush blazed over my cheeks.

Mr. Closs was sitting on the corner of a large trunk, his hands wrapped around a small book that rested in his lap, and his eyes lit with mirth.

"Good day, Annabelle," he said in a jolly tone.

I threaded the dusting rag through my hand as nerves tried to steal my voice. Then I forced my arms to my sides and said, "Good day, Mr. Closs."

"Please, call me Nicolai."

I studied him, doubting his sincerity, but his expression was so open that it put me at ease, and I gave a single nod.

"Do you regularly hide in the curtains?" he asked, trying not to smile.

So much for being at ease. I ducked my head in embarrassment. "He's never here when I come to clean. I didn't know what to do."

He tilted his head as he looked up at me from his perch on the trunk. "I think he would have understood if you had just kept cleaning."

"I know, but..." His suggestion was perfectly reasonable, but he didn't understand.

Instead of asking me something else or simply moving on, Mr. Closs waited as if he was in no rush. I cut my eyes over to him, then away, unable to look at him without noting that he was no less handsome than he had been a week ago. He may have even been more so. "I never know what state a gentleman will be in when they enter their private chambers," I rambled.

I spared him a glance and saw that his brow was raised.

"Some gentlemen seem to forget that servants have access to their rooms, or maybe they just don't care. On occasion, they'll walk in the door already in the midst of undressing, and—" I stopped speaking as my cheeks flamed hotter. Why was I telling him this? He didn't need to know any of this. In fact, why was he still here? This was hardly his concern.

He gave an awkward clearing of his throat. "I'd never considered how that could be a hazard of the job."

I dared a look at him, wondering if he was laughing at me, but he seemed more chagrined on my behalf than amused. "It hasn't happened often, but..." I lifted one shoulder, unwilling to say any more about it. It usually happened with guests. One time, a young man had hurried into his room while I was cleaning, his shirt already

over his head, and he'd almost started removing his trousers before he saw me and jumped in surprise.

I had just been standing there, completely dumbfounded, but when he squealed in surprise, it had propelled me into motion, and I'd fled the room without a word.

"Well"—another awkward clearing of his throat—"luckily, Lord Calderon was only looking for his brooch." He seemed embarrassed, and that made me smile, as did the thought of Lord Calderon being so attached to his brooch.

"Yes, Willa gave it to him." Her relationship with her father reminded me of what mine used to be with mine.

"I have not had much chance to interact with the young lady of the house," he said.

My brow scrunched as I wondered why he seemed determined to draw me into conversation. "Willa is sweet," I told him. "She has the more easygoing personality of her father."

"What's it like taking care of the family?"

My forehead bunched together. "You take care of them much more than I do," I pointed out.

He shook his head. "I take care of the estate. You care for their personal spaces." His eyes drifted over me, like there was something of interest to see in me. "It's different."

I set my hands on my hips, taken back by his perusal, and looked about the room, trying to focus on the conversation instead of the way his gaze made my lower back hot. "Yes, I suppose. It makes me feel like I know them, which is a bit strange since they don't know me. But I like taking care of Willa's things." I smiled to myself. "She tries hard to be a young lady, but she still likes her dolls and wooden ponies. When I'm arranging her toys, I like to set them up in epic battles and..." I was rambling—to the steward. He took care of the estate. He paid my wages.

He paid my wages.

My brow furrowed. He'd likely been the one to place my wages into the pouch that was given to me. Did he know that Brunson had wanted my wages docked?

"Annabelle?"

The quiet way he said my name made me realize I was chewing on the side of my thumb. I dropped it and looked at him. "Apologies. I was just..." I could ask him, couldn't I? "Perhaps you know."

"Know what?"

"When you gave me my wages last week, I received the full amount."

His brow rose. "Is there a reason you would not have received the full amount?"

"Brunson made it clear he was going to dock my wages."

This time, his brow furrowed, and his eyes narrowed. "Why?"

I swallowed but continued, determined to be honest. "Because something was broken—something of Willa's, actually—and he blamed me and made me pay for it." I lifted my chin, trying not to let my indignation get the better of me.

"What was it?"

"A jewelry box."

"And is that normal, for wages to be garnished because of accidents?"

I admired the fact that he asked. He was new, and clearly capable, but he wasn't so prideful that he thought he knew and understood everything. "No, but..." What could I say? Brunson turned mean when the Calderons left? Now that Cecily was gone, Brunson seemed to hate me? Instead, I settled on, "He doesn't like me."

His nostrils flared, and he seemed to struggle with what to say next. He pushed to his feet in agitation. "Well, then," he finally said, "I'm glad you were paid in full."

"So am I; but why?" I asked. He was the steward; surely he could tell me something. "I know that Brunson keeps those numbers locked down until he...until he..."

Nicolai's eyes flashed with knowing. He knew something. Of course he knew something. He likely knew everything. My brow pulled in as I stared at him.

He tried to keep his expression neutral, but there was something defiant there in Nicolai Closs's face that told me he knew that Brunson had wanted my wages garnished and that he was the reason I'd received the full amount.

I took a stuttering breath and crossed my arms, shifting my feet as I tried to decide how I felt about that. I was so grateful for it, but could I accept the help? Tears stung my eyes, but I forced them back. "Nicolai?"

He lifted his chin. "Yes, Annabelle?"

"Was it you? Did you give me—"

He squared his shoulders. "I only did what was right."

I was used to taking care of myself, and any help I had received had always come from women. Having Nicolai do something to ease my burden was strange and wonderful, but if he'd given me money from his own pockets, that wouldn't be right. I couldn't accept. I opened my mouth, ready to object, but he continued.

"Lord Calderon trusts me to ensure his staff are paid fairly, and so I did. I corrected the error in the ledgers, and the estate paid you what you were due."

My lungs slowly expanded as I took in his words. This hadn't been charity. He'd recognized the injustice of what Brunson had wanted, and he corrected it. He'd taken my side without even knowing the story. I closed my eyes, overwhelmed by gratitude and impressed by his strength of mind and sense of right and wrong.

I was not used to being overwrought, but something about this man filled my senses in ways I didn't recognize. I couldn't keep it in. I opened my eyes and stepped forward so I could wrap him in a grateful hug. "Thank you, Nicolai," I said with my forehead pressed to his chest.

He didn't return the embrace, and that was fine. I was thanking him. I didn't need reciprocity. But a hug seemed inadequate, so I impulsively popped up on my toes and pressed my lips to his cheek.

Then I fled from the room because *what was I thinking?*

I'd kissed his cheek. Actually kissed it. I'd only ever kissed the cheeks of my direct family members. I was not an effusive, affectionate person. Not usually. But my relief at knowing the full wage had been intentional, and my joy at realizing that, for some reason, Nicolai had decided to advocate for me, had combined and I couldn't keep it in. He was just so good.

Had I ever met a man as truly good as Nicolai Closs? I didn't think I had.

It took me until the end of the corridor to remember that I hadn't finished my work in the master's chamber.

My feet slowed to a stop, and I tipped my head back with a sigh. Now I had to go back, and Nicolai (I loved that he'd asked me to call him Nicolai) would probably be coming this way and would see how I was being ridiculous.

But there was nothing for it. I spun around and started back toward Lord Calderon's chamber. I was nearly to the door before Nicolai stepped out into the corridor, and we both came to an abrupt stop.

His eyes were wide. "Annabelle."

“Yes. Hello.” *Sentences, Belle! Use full sentences!* “I just remembered there were other things I needed to finish.” I gestured toward the chamber, trying not to fixate on how much I liked the sound of my name from his mouth.

“Yes, of course.” He stepped aside. “I had interrupted your work.” He gestured toward the door. “Please. By all means.” He was babbling just as much as I was. How strange.

I dipped into a quick curtsy and then stepped inside, fully expecting that he would disappear down the hall.

Instead, he said from the doorway, “Actually, I was wondering if I could ask you something.”

I nodded my permission, but instead of waiting to see what he’d say, I decided my hands needed an occupation. I grabbed the broom that I’d left outside the door and started sweeping.

“I’m afraid it might be an impertinent subject, and I don’t want you to think that I’m prying.”

I glanced up at him. “I don’t mind questions, Nicolai. And I won’t answer if I don’t want to.”

“Very well. It’s about Brunson.”

My face instantly scrunched. I didn’t want to speak of that man anymore. Why couldn’t Nicolai ask me something pleasant?

“I can see this is not your favorite subject,” he said.

I let out a sigh and paused in my sweeping, leaning on my broom as I looked at him. “Nearly every unpleasant aspect in my life is because of him,” I said honestly.

“Yes, I had that sense, and it’s made me wonder just how unpleasant he can be...” He trailed off, as if this were a question in and of itself.

“You’re asking me how unpleasant he can be?” He had seen what Brunson did to Cecily and knew how the butler had tried to dock my wages unfairly.

He winced and looked away, searching the ceiling for words. “Yes. But more specifically”—he huffed a sigh—“he is a large man with authority.” His gaze finally settled back on me. “I know that unscrupulous men in his position have been known to take liberties—take advantage of those in their employ in terrible ways.”

*Oh.*

I supposed I shouldn’t be surprised that he would wonder, but it was a relief to be able to answer. “No,” I said with a shake of my head. “He was violent with Cecily. He was. But never in *that* way.”

His chest expanded as he took a deep breath and let it out carefully. “Good. Good.”

“It’s good of you to ask,” I said, realizing just how strange this conversation was. These were the things we maids feared and whispered about among ourselves, but I’d never had someone like Nicolai act as though it was their concern. “It’s not really your responsibility.”

He gave a sharp shake of his head. “I disagree. If my sisters have taught me anything, it’s that men need to take more responsibility for such things. I would never want anyone working beneath me to feel as though they were in danger, in any way.”

My throat burned. I wasn’t used to someone exhibiting such blatant care for me, and as much as I wanted to convince myself that it wasn’t really *me* but *everyone* that he cared about, I couldn’t quite believe it. Because the way he looked at me...

Stars, he was handsome. I forced a swallow. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He held my gaze for several breaths, and though I had work to do and I was sure he did too, I wasn’t in a hurry to look away. His blue eyes

complemented the golden brown of his curly hair.

I bit down on my lip, nervous excitement settling in my stomach. The movement caused his gaze to drop to my lips. Then he suddenly blinked and looked away, clearing his throat.

"I must be going. Thank you for speaking with me, Annabelle." He bowed and turned away.

Several long moments passed before I was able to draw a full breath and get back to work.

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I stepped out onto the back terrace for the third time in the last quarter hour. Mara, Livvy, and I were shuttling all the trappings necessary for a grand picnic out into the yard. Willa had invited her father to join her for afternoon tea on the back lawn, and being the indulgent father he was, he'd agreed enthusiastically. I'd helped her select the quilt they would use, and she'd worked with the cook to determine the delightful array of refreshments that would be provided.

We'd already set up the quilt—a lovely light blue with pink and yellow flowers dotting it—and laid it out on the grass with a sheet beneath so that it wouldn't be soiled. There were wicker baskets with napkins draped over the edge, made to look as if the food had come out of them, when really we were carefully bringing out each dish, meticulously arranged on trays, and setting them up in a manner that was most pleasing to the eye.

I set down the tray of scones and the pitcher of lemonade, being sure that they were well settled on the quilt and not in danger of tipping over.

Mara arranged the plates, goblets, and cutlery. "A fine little outing they will have," Mara commented with a smile. "So long as Lady Calderon does not decide to ruin it."

I tipped my head in acknowledgement of that possibility. Lady Calderon vacillated between being tolerant of her daughter's fancies and her husband's indulgence and being annoyed by them. However, if I were to guess, I would say Lady Calderon would not interfere. Despite her tendency to turn her nose up, I believed she did enjoy seeing her daughter happy.

Mara and Livvy headed back inside, but I stayed for a moment, adjusting a few things to ensure the presentation was as lovely as possible before heading back to the house myself.

The melancholy that fell over me wasn't surprising. Willa was about to have a fanciful outing with her father, which reminded me of the relationship I used to have with my own father. The grief I carried in relation to my father was messy. I was angry he'd sent me away, and I blamed him for that time that I'd missed, not just with him but with my sisters. Yet, that blame felt wrong when I'd returned to find him so altered. How could I be angry at someone who was so sick? How could I miss someone so badly while being so angry?

I was climbing the steps to the veranda when someone called from behind me, "Preparing to beat another rug?"

I looked back to see Nicolai coming from the direction of the stables, a ledger in hand and his flat cap tilted at an angle. Seeing him immediately brightened my mood, pulling a smile from my lips. "I'm always prepared to beat rugs, but only when they deserve it."

He smiled at my retort, and as he drew closer, the smell of hay mingled with cedar washed over me, and I had to resist the urge to close my eyes and sigh. He smelled delicious. How completely unfair. "Were you counting horses or some such



nonsense?”

He laughed as he stopped with one foot propped on the bottom step, looking up at me. “You have an interesting view of what my job is.”

His easy smile made me bold, so I decided to tease him a bit more. “Oh, it’s all counting and tally marks. Don’t act as if it’s complicated,” I said with a dismissive wave of my hand.

“Alas, you’ve found me out,” he said on a chuckle. “Please don’t tell anyone, else Lord Calderon might realize how horribly overpaid I am.”

“Especially for someone barely out of the cradle.”

He scoffed in mock offense. “You wound me, madame. I thought I was doing a rather good job of seeming older than my years.” He tugged at his vest and brushed at his sleeves.

“Is that why you have a beard?”

He gave me a puzzled look. “What?”

“Do you have a beard to make you look older?”

One eyebrow raised. “*Does* it make me look older?”

I shrugged. “I suppose I don’t know, having never seen you without, but I would imagine it would.”

“Maybe so. But to answer your question, no. I wear a beard because it’s easier.”

“Do you like the way it looks?”

A slow and rather mischievous grin slid over his mouth. “I think that’s the wrong question.”

My stomach fluttered because of that grin. “What’s the right question?”

His brow lifted, and he smirked. “The right question is: do *you* like the way it looks?”

I tried to respond but only managed a choked noise as I gaped and my cheeks flushed. I was suddenly fascinated by his beard and the way it shaped his face. Then I was wondering what it might feel like under my palm or against my cheek.

And Nicolai, curse him, just stared at me, wide-eyed and trying to look innocent.

I finally pulled myself together enough to turn the conversation elsewhere.

“Your pride must truly be suffering if you need compliments from me,” I said, ignoring the fact that I’d just been fantasizing about the feel of his facial hair.

“I grew up in a household with four sisters. Any pride I had was squashed by their mockery long ago.”

“Oh, poor boy,” I said with a dramatic frown. “Were your sisters *so mean* to you?”

He laughed right out loud. “Ah, yes, I see I will get no sympathy from you.”

I chuckled and gave a little shrug. “You already admitted to liking your sisters. You can’t take it back now.”

“Fine. I do like my sisters. Very much. But it’s also true that they had a humbling effect on me.”

His sincerity made me like him even more, and it prompted some sincerity of my own. “Well, to answer your question... I do like your beard,” I admitted then immediately dropped my gaze. *Too bold*, I told myself. *That was too bold*.

I expected a witty retort, but instead, the silence stretched, my neck grew hot, and I was forced to look up at him.

His eyes were fixed on me with an intensity that made my breath hitch. He still didn’t say anything, but I watched his jaw move back and forth as if his throat kept forming words that never made their way past his lips. Finally, he closed his mouth, swallowed, and then said, “I am glad of it.”

Saints and angels, his gaze was so dark and his voice so husky that I flushed even hotter. I shouldn't be surprised that he'd matched my boldness with his own, but surely he had no idea the effect *that look* had on me. If he did, he would not use it so casually.

The uncontrollable urge to fidget washed over me, and I brushed my hair back from my face and cleared my throat. "Well—" *Saints, my voice just squeaked*. "I'd better be going. I have...things to do."

"Yes. Of course. I do as well. All those things to count." He smirked at me.

I fought a blush and fled into the house.

Heavens, had I just blatantly flirted with the estate steward? And had he flirted back?

I WAS THINKING about Nicolai's eyes again.

Also his lips, which was silly because I had no business thinking about the estate steward's lips, but they were lovely. They were full and inviting, and thinking about them was a good distraction while I worked over the next week, and especially tonight while I was doing my second round of chores. Or, more accurately, while I was doing Mara's chores. She was sick again, so I was in charge of tidying Nicolai's office, among other rooms.

Being in his office made it impossible not to think of him. We'd come across each other a number of times since our talk on the veranda, and each time, he would take a few minutes to speak with me so long as no one else was around. I appreciated that. Girls who were seen flirting with other servants gained a bad reputation, which was unfair and maddening, but it still happened.

He continued to surprise me, not only with his thoughtfulness but with his wit. He seemed to take it as a personal challenge to make me laugh each time we interacted and was constantly engaging me in silly and ridiculous conversations that left me feeling lighter and more hopeful when I walked away from them.

Too bad he wasn't here this evening. I would have enjoyed bantering with him while I worked. It would have made the time pass more quickly.

I was tired. Both Mara and Mrs. Thornton had asked if I was certain I didn't mind the extra work, and I had assured them I didn't. And I didn't mind, not really. I hated to see Mara worried about her job on top of being sick in bed, so I truly did want to help. That didn't mean it was easy, though. I wanted nothing more than to find my bed as soon as possible and fall into it, but I'd ignored the dusting for the past several days and couldn't put it off any longer. So I dragged a stool over in front of the shelves that held ledgers, files, decorations, decanters, and glasses.

Efficiency, that's what I needed. The dusting didn't need to be perfect; it just needed to be done. I started at the top shelves and worked my way down, the movements hypnotic as I swirled the duster around books, over busts, and across ledgers.

I was moving too fast, so fast that when I was dusting around the decanters, I knocked one over. It was a big, beautiful piece with only a small amount of wine in the bottom, and as it tipped toward the floor, I lunged after it.

Instead of catching it, I only succeeded in falling off my perch atop the stool. The decanter shattered on the stone floor with a resounding crash that diminished into the tinkling of glass. I let out a startled yelp as I fell on top of the mess, catching myself with my elbow.

Searing pain raced up my arm.

I sat up carefully, trying not to push my hands into the shards. Then I looked down at the piece of glass sticking out of my arm, soaking my cream sleeve in bright-red blood. I panicked and pulled it out, which increased the flow of blood and made my breathing speed up. I pulled up my sleeve, staring at the wound and at the glass in my bloody fingers and couldn't think what to do next.

"What happened?" a voice demanded.

I looked to the doorway where Nicolai stood, looking horrified. I'd broken his decanter. No doubt an expensive decanter. "I'm sorry," I babbled, trying to focus through the pain. "It was an accident."

"I'm not blaming you," he said as he hurried forward, pushing aside the overturned stool and being careful to avoid the glass shards. "Did you fall?"

"I wasn't being careful enough," I admitted. It had been stupid. So stupid. I was usually meticulous and focused, but I was exhausted.

He crouched down and took my arm in his hands, covering the cut with one of his large hands and using his other to pull at his neckcloth. "What are you doing in here? This isn't your responsibility."

"Mara is sick again," I explained, my voice shaking.

"So then, leave the work undone," he said like it was obvious.

Perhaps it was the pain that made his statement not make sense. "She'll be fired."

He huffed and finally managed to free the cloth from his neck. Then he folded one end of it and moved his hand away from the cut so he could dab at the blood instead. I hissed a breath through my teeth.

"I broke your decanter."

"It doesn't matter," he said and then laid the cloth over my injury, holding it in place with one hand while he wrapped his other arm around my waist and pulled me up.

"But I can't afford to replace it." Didn't he understand? He might be able to break decanters willy-nilly, but I couldn't. I didn't have the funds.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew that my panicked thoughts were not quite rational, but pain will do that to a person.

"I don't need a replacement," he said gently. "Come sit." He directed me to sit in one of the big chairs on the opposite side of the desk. He sat in the other, pulling it closer until our knees were entwined. "Hold still."

He studied my arm, and I studied the top of his head. He had beautiful curls. Warm brown and wild. Then my eyes drifted down to his face. His brow was etched with concern as he studied the gash that was the length of my pointer finger and still bleeding freely. The knee of his trousers was dotted in blood. "I'm sorry, Nicolai."

"Stop apologizing." His voice was flat, and it hurt my feelings.

"I don't mean to be a nuisance."

He glanced up at me, looking confused. "You're not a nuisance. I just don't think you should apologize for something that isn't your fault." He bent his head and kept dabbing.

I winced. The wound was starting to throb, and I bounced my knee, trying to control the pain.

"We should put some brandy on it." He reached over and grabbed the bottle from the corner of his desk. "It will help it heal, but it will sting." He folded up the other end of his neckcloth, which was free of blood, and poured the spirits onto it. Then he fixed his eyes to mine. "Are you ready?" He held the cloth hovering over the cut but didn't press down, seemingly waiting for my permission.

"I don't know," I said. I didn't want to give permission. He said it would hurt, and it hurt too much already. I was shaking with the pain, and I didn't want any more. I shook my head sharply. "Distract me," I insisted.

"How?"

"I don't know!" Why was he making me think? "Tell me something shocking. Kiss me. Anything."

His eyes bulged. "*Kiss you?*"

I looked up at him, startled. “What? Did I say that?” I wasn’t supposed to have said *that*. Not out loud.

“Yes, you did.”

“Oh.” Saints, that was humiliating. It made me aware of how close he sat, and the press of our knees, and the blue of his eyes, and the wrongness of suggesting to the *estate steward* that he kiss me.

“I—” I panicked and did the only thing I could think of. I grabbed his hand that held the alcohol-soaked cloth and pushed down, pressing it to the wound.

The pain was searing and immediate. I pinched my eyes closed and kept my mouth shut even as I screamed.

Nicolai shifted, but I ignored it until his mouth suddenly pressed to mine. My eyes shot open, and I hummed against his lips as searing pain and sweet distraction clashed inside me.

He tried to pull back, but I chased after him, pressing my lips hard against his. I still felt the pain, but this wonderfully confusing kiss that he was giving me—my first kiss—was not something I was ready to end. He complied with my unspoken request and let the kiss continue for several moments as I tried to push away the pain.

Then he broke away suddenly, removed the cloth from my cut, and bent his head so that he could blow on the wound. The relief of the alcohol being removed and the air rushing over the cut was immediate, and the burning sensation eased the more he blew.

I stared at the top of his head again. At his forehead and the slope of his nose. Sweat beaded on my forehead, from the pain or from my racing heart, or a confusing mash-up of both.

Nicolai had kissed me. I’d made a fool of myself suggesting he do just that, but then he had kissed me. I knew it probably wasn’t what a usual kiss should be like. It hadn’t been enjoyable, not really. But it had meant something to me. Did it mean anything to him?

Once my pain eased enough that I felt I could speak without my voice trembling, I said, “Nicolai?” My voice was more quiet and more fragile than usual, but I wanted him to look at me.

He glanced up, and after his eyes met mine, his gaze dropped to my lips for the barest of moments. I swallowed, and his eyes returned to mine. “You should call me Nico,” he said.

A tiny smile tugged up one corner of my mouth, the pleasure of him asking me to use his nickname allowing me to break through the pain for a moment. “Nico,” I said, testing it out.

He swallowed, then found another dry portion of his neckcloth—those things were ridiculously long—and pressed it to my arm. But he didn’t say anything, and the softness in his eyes made me honest.

“I’ve never been kissed before,” I whispered.

He raised his eyes to mine again. “I was worried about that.”

I tilted my head. “Should I have kissed boys before now?” I asked.

“Of course not,” he said as his face flushed. “That’s...none of my business. But a first kiss—” He shook his head sadly. “That’s not how a first kiss should be.”

I had the wild thought that I wanted him to demonstrate how it should be, and I wanted to move toward him and give him that opportunity, but instead of blurting that out, I asked, “How should a first kiss be?”

He stared at me for several moments, and I could hear his breathing. His lips parted, but there was too much indecision on his face, and eventually he looked

away. "Ask me another time, and I'll show you."

My heart swooped so high that it nearly left my body. I would hold him to that, so he'd better not be saying it in jest.

He leaned back, creating space between us. "Right now, we need to get you to someone who can bandage this properly."

I nodded, accepting that he was likely thinking more clearly than I was at the moment. "Katharine is in charge of the stillroom."

"Come along." He looped his arm around me and pulled me too easily to my feet, but the moment he stepped away, my head felt too heavy, and the ground beneath me moved. I latched on to his shirt for balance.

He wrapped his other arm around me and held me up while I tried to blink the fuzziness away. "Do you need to sit?"

"Just give me a moment." I breathed carefully as the clock ticked on the mantel and the fire crackled. Eventually, I was able to loosen my grip.

"Are you certain you don't want to sit?" he asked. His concern and patience made my heart swell even more.

I shook my head. "The sooner I get to Katharine, the sooner she can help with the throbbing."

He stooped to pick up the cloth that had dropped from my arm when I'd stood and placed it back over my injury. He laid a steady hand on my back, and we made our way toward the kitchen.

Katharine was easy to find, and as soon as she saw me, she went into motion, shooing Nico away. I didn't want him to go, but there was no good reason to contradict Katharine, so he went. And I missed him.

IT'S AMAZING THE things one can manage to do with only one hand. The cut on my arm was deep enough that any time I tried to use it for more than gentle movement, the cut would reopen. So I'd found ways to do almost everything one-handed.

I thought I'd been doing well enough. My work had taken longer, but I'd gotten it done.

So then, why was I standing before Brunson, being reprimanded? "You broke yet another precious item."

"It was an accident, and I have spoken to Mr. Closs," I hurried to say.

"You injured yourself in the process as well. It seems your friend's clumsiness has worn off on you." He put on a stern face, but there was glee underneath it.

"Pardon? What friend?"

"The one who disappeared in the middle of the night like a coward. She was always prone to accidents."

My nostrils flared. I should keep my mouth shut. I should. But his audacity was too much to ignore, and I couldn't keep quiet. "We both know there was nothing accidental about her injuries."

One bushy eyebrow rose. A challenge and a warning. "Do we?"

I didn't respond but lifted my chin in defiance. I wouldn't provoke him further, but I refused to back down.

"You were the one who stepped in and did her work, weren't you?"

My shoulders pulled back. "Yes, sir."

"And I would gamble that you're the one who covered for Mara as well."

It was something I was proud of, and yet the way he glared made me shrink as I answered, "Yes, sir."

"Hmm. So you have assisted two maids to cover their own incompetence."

"I was helping—"

"Don't interrupt," he said in a cold, quiet voice that felt so much worse than if he had shouted. "I realize now that I was too lenient with your friend. She didn't deserve all the chances I gave her. I won't make the same mistake again. So unless you can give me a compelling reason for you to stay, I'll have to let you go."

A stone dropped in my stomach. I could handle a reprimand, maybe even a punishment, but...he was firing me? No, I needed this job. My *family* needed me to keep this job.

"I..." I swallowed as hot and cold flashed through my body. A compelling reason to stay, that's what he had asked for. I had plenty of compelling reasons, but were there any that would convince him? *Be confident*, I told myself. "I'm a hard worker, probably one of the hardest-working maids in the employ of this house. I always complete my tasks, and Mrs. Thornton will tell you that I am always willing to help others when it's needed." It was all true, but I doubted it would convince him.

He studied me, but his expression still held cruelty. "Always willing to help, are you?"

"Yes, sir."

“In that case, the most helpful thing I can think of would be for you to tell me where your friend disappeared to. I have a strong sense of justice, and I feel I must warn her new employers about her incompetence.”

My stomach sank further. I couldn't tell him that—not even to save my job—and I realized the futility of arguing with him. He wasn't firing me because I was incapable or incompetent. He was firing me because I had helped Cecily escape. And for whatever reason, he resented her absence. He held some grudge that I didn't understand and was determined to punish her. “I don't know where she went,” I lied.

He frowned as his eyes hardened. “Then I cannot help you. You are dismissed.”

“But, sir—”

“We have no more use for you here. You hold more loyalty for your absent friend than you do for your employer. You will go now.”

I sputtered and stammered, but I was escorted to my room and told to gather my things. The footman tried to keep his face impassive as he watched me collect my meager belongings, but I could tell he was upset by this turn of events. He wordlessly took my bundle of belongings from me and carried it for me to the servants' entrance, unable to meet my eye.

I stepped through the door and turned back, my mouth open, searching for words that wouldn't come and that wouldn't do any good regardless. The footman set my things on the ground and looked at me for one pitiful moment, giving a sad shake of his head before turning away.

The door shut in my face, and I was left standing outside. All of my belongings were wrapped in my shawl and tied together. The bundle sat at my feet, waiting for me to have the presence of mind to pick it up and walk away.

I was no longer employed at Fowler House.

I blinked there in the shade of the manor. Perhaps I should have gone with Cecily, but my family was here, and the only reason I was able to help them by sharing my wages was because they lived close by. But now...I was the one who needed help.

The weight of my failure sat so heavy that I could hardly move. I had to return home. The last thing my family needed was another mouth to feed, but I didn't have a choice. So I bent, grabbing hold of the large knot and hefting it with my uninjured arm. Then I turned my back on the looming house and walked toward the gate.

The sun on my back was not a comfort. Instead, it seemed to scorch me, reminding me of how helpless I was against the elements. I had always been a hard worker. I'd always been a good person. Yet, life had seen fit to throw me out into the world and demand that I try even harder.

When would my efforts be enough?

My thoughts churned as my feet moved along. The worry and indignation rattling inside me was loud enough that I did not hear Nico approaching until he was practically upon me.

“Annabelle!”

I stopped and turned, the bundle hanging heavy at my side. He was jogging toward me, so I set down my bundle and waited for him to catch up.

He stopped in front of me, his eyes assessing, no doubt able to see my defeated posture. I wasn't even able to scrounge up a smile for him.

“You are leaving,” he said.

I swallowed. “I am. Brunson has fired me.”

He blinked in shock for a moment and then shook his head. “But you are under the housekeeper's charge.”



"I'm supposed to be. But Lady Calderon has allowed Brunson to step in."

"I could...I could speak to Lord Calderon."

"And say what?" I asked. I appreciated his desire to help, but I knew it was useless.

"I...I could say I broke the decanter. I—"

"I've already owned up to it. They won't believe you."

There was a hard glint in his eye. "Brunson is taking advantage. I've seen the way he works."

I gave a frustrated shake of my head. "It doesn't matter. Lady Calderon will always side with him, and I'm already fired."

"But..." He looked so lost. "There has to be something."

I shoved down my own annoyance, needing to comfort him instead. "It's all right. There's nothing you could have done." And there was no need for him to suffer.

"But I—" His jaw clenched, and his eyes filled with remorse. "I could help. Let me give you some money, or—"

"I don't want anything from you, Nico," I insisted, bristling. "Don't worry about me."

His face fell, and I immediately regretted my biting words. "I never thought he would—"

I shook my head. "Think nothing of it. This isn't your fault." I'd chosen to help Cecily, and I couldn't regret that.

"You were cleaning my office when the accident happened. If I'd been there, or if—"

"It doesn't matter now," I said with a shrug. "And it wasn't really about the accident anyway." I could have told him more about Cecily, and about Brunson's obsession with her, but what did it really matter in the end? "I must go."

"Where? Where will you go?"

"To my father's home."

Relief softened his features. He thought my father's home meant hope. "He lives close?"

I nodded. "Very close. And my father's health has been poor lately, so they can certainly use my help."

His eyes dimmed again. "I will make this right," he said with what I recognized as false confidence.

"I'm not your problem."

"I know that, but..." He moved from foot to foot in agitation, his eyes casting about as if he'd find a solution in the clouds. Then he abruptly turned back to me. "I could write a recommendation letter for you. I am the steward—"

"Nico," I cut him off. "Only a letter from a housekeeper would be appropriate. Do you know what it looks like when a maid is sent away carrying a recommendation from a man?"

His face fell, followed by his posture. He looked nearly as defeated as I felt. "Perhaps Mrs. Thornton—"

I shook my head. "She can't go against Brunson if she values her job."

"But..." he trailed off, and we stared at one another for several moments, both knowing there was nothing to say.

I bent to pick up my bundle. "Thank you for tending to my arm," I said, unable to find another way to bid him farewell. "And for always being kind," I added, realizing in that moment just how much his kindness had come to mean to me. I would miss it. I would miss him.

"I'm glad to have met you, Annabelle. Take care of yourself."

I forced one side of my mouth to curl up in a small smile. "I always do."

I walked away, and somehow, my grief and worry was deeper after leaving Nico. He'd represented a dream. Not quite a hope, because despite the fact that he'd kissed me, he was still a steward, which put him several steps above me. But the dream had been lovely.

I'd thought after Cecily was safely away that my difficulties would be over, at least for a time. But now my concern for Cecily was renewed. Why did Brunson feel the need to track her down? Was his pride hurt? Did he view her as a possession that belonged to him? I was grateful once again that Mrs. Thornton had arranged for Cecily to leave. Clearly, she would never have been safe at Fowler House.

And now I was not safe either. My employment had kept me safe from starvation, safe from poverty. That safety was gone now, not just for me but for my whole family.

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The walk across the estate, through the fields and down the lane where my family cottage sat, was not long enough. Each step took effort as the weight of my failure pressed down on my chest like a suffocating embrace. The road stretched endlessly, each twist in the path feeling like a mockery of my own uncertain future.

I was going home. That should have been a joyful thought, and instead, it was grim indeed. My arrival would only drag my family down further. I stopped when our home came into sight, and for the first time in too long, I truly looked at it. The once tidy cottage that had been surrounded by vibrant plants and clucking chickens in my youth was now cracked and crooked, washed in gray and surrounded by weeds. I knew it had been this way for a long time. I'd just never been willing to see it as it truly was until now.

I struggled to swallow down the distress rising in my throat, trying to summon the courage to go in and admit my failures, when the door opened, and Charlotte stepped out, a hand shading her eyes. "Annabelle?" she asked, bewildered.

I forced a smile to my face. "It's me, Lottie."

She walked toward me. "What are you doing standing out here? And why are you here? It's not your day off. And what happened to your arm?"

My forced smile fell to the ground and disappeared among the weeds. I swallowed the ache in my throat. "I'm so sorry, Lottie."

Concern immediately blanketed her expression, tugging down at the edges of her face. "Sorry for what?" She wrapped an arm around me, seeming to sense how weak and useless I was as she pulled me toward the door.

"It's my fault." It was strange hearing myself say those words. I didn't actually believe them, but they felt horribly true.

"Grace!" Charlotte shouted.

Grace reached the door at the same time we did, a pair of knitting needles in her hands as she continued her work on the sock she was creating. Her brow immediately dropped in concern. "What's going on?" she asked as she stood back to let us in.

"They let me go," I confessed as Charlotte urged me into a chair. "I don't work at Fowler House anymore."

"But why?" Lottie demanded.

I held up my bandaged arm. "I broke a decanter and hurt myself, and Brunson fired me over it." I'd told my sisters about Brunson and his increasing unfairness.

“So there’s no chance of you getting your job back?” Grace asked.

“No,” I confessed in a whisper.

“And no recommendation?”

I shook my head.

They both stilled, and it was that stillness that broke me. I could feel their disappointment and worry, their panic. So I buried my face in my hands to hide from it. “What are we going to do?”

Several heavy beats of silence made my ears ring before Grace said with false cheer, “It will be all right. Everything will be fine. We’ll just go back to how things were before.”

“You mean when Mama was still alive and Papa was strong enough to work all the time?” I asked the floor.

“You can still knit, can’t you?” Charlotte asked. “You’ll help us make more socks. As it gets colder, we’ll make scarves and hats for those who ask, and that will make up the extra.”

I finally looked up at her, loving her attempt at cheer but hating that it simply wasn’t true. “It won’t be enough.”

“It won’t be *as much*,” she said, sitting down and picking up her own knitting, her hands working away furiously like she knew we would all be chasing an impossible goal. “But we’ll work it out. We always do.” There was a manic quality to her forced cheer now. “Maybe without your wages, Papa will realize how important it is to keep trying to work.”

A weary sigh escaped me, and I closed my eyes. “I don’t think it’s a choice he makes, Lottie.”

“I know,” she said, her voice suddenly devoid of the optimism she’d tried so hard to hold on to. “I just wish it was.”

For a moment, only the clicking of knitting needles filled the air. I finally opened my eyes and looked to my sisters. Charlotte was looking at me, still desperately trying to keep a cheerful expression, but the tension around her mouth and eyes told the story.

I watched them both, impressed by their speed as I always was, but the boney quality of their hands left a heavy weight hanging on my heart. They were both thinner than the last time I’d seen them only a few weeks ago. The last three months had left a marked difference in their frames as my father’s ability to make a living dwindled to nothing. I looked around the room, wondering if it had been this sparse and dim the last time I’d been here. I’d always thought of this home as small and cozy, if a little barren. Now it just looked desolate. Cobwebs in the highest corners, blankets worn threadbare, and not enough wood stacked by the fireplace. Did we have wood cut and ready outside in preparation for the cold that was coming? I didn’t think so.

My heart sank, knowing that things would only get worse from here. The knowledge that I wouldn’t be able to help the way I had before caused a great ball of resentment and shame to bloom inside me. My failure left such a bitter taste in my mouth that I felt nauseated. I cast my eyes about until I found a basket with partially finished socks. I went over and sorted through it, finding one that had the heel turn and gusset completed. I could knit the foot of this one. The foot of a sock was much more straightforward than the heel, and I was confident I could complete it without messing up, though I’d be much slower than my sisters.

I settled into the work, the cut on my arm tugging uncomfortably once in a while. I knew I should go say hello to my father, but I just couldn’t. Not yet.

MY LIST OF tasks was long. In the three weeks since I'd been let go, I'd come to the conclusion that while I could knit, my time was usually better spent elsewhere. Each project that I found around the cottage was a relief, a chance to help that didn't include trying to keep up with my sisters. There was plenty to be done around the house and property to improve our situation, and our lack of funds (and by extension, our lack of food) made it clear that preparing the garden for next year was high on that list.

I sank a trowel into the dirt, trying to loosen the weeds from the cold earth. It was October, and growing season was over—not that there had been anything growing in these garden beds this year. When my mother was alive, they'd been filled with lush plants. We'd harvested vegetables aplenty for our needs when I was a child. I wasn't sure when that had stopped, but if we were to have any hope of a successful garden in the spring, I needed to prepare the beds now before the ground hardened completely.

Weeding was easy. I could be fast and efficient, and the constant movement let my mind rest from its worry. And I had plenty of worry. Papa rarely left his room. We brought him what little food we could afford, and he would eat either in angry silence or in dazed confusion. Watching him day in and day out over the last three weeks had left a weight around my heart. He was disappearing, right in front of my eyes. My father was disappearing.

"Excuse me, madam?"

I sat back on my heels and turned to see who had called out, a hand raised to shade my eyes from the sun.

My heart leapt and then crashed and tumbled inside me, unsure how to feel. "Nico?"

His surprise reflected my own. He stood several paces off, his vest and jacket buttoned up, with an official ledger held against his side with one arm. His flat cap was in place, but his curls burst out from underneath the rim to cover his ears and the back of his neck. "Annabelle?" Then a smile spread over his face. "What a relief to see you," he said with a gusty sigh. "I've been worried about you. How have you been? How is your family?"

I climbed to my feet and smiled in return, and though it wasn't the full smile that I'd shared with him at Fowler House, it wasn't forced either. "As good as can be expected." I fumbled for words as I used my apron to wipe the soil from my hands. What could I say that would be honest? I had no wish to complain or embarrass myself. "Have they unchained you from your desk and allowed you to venture away from the estate?" I teased.

A faint smile crossed his mouth. "They do let me out for fresh air on occasion," he joked, but then he became serious all too quickly. "Have you found new employment or..." he prompted with a hopeful glint in his eye.

"My sisters and I knit socks," I blurted as I straightened my spine, "among other things." The idea of Nico pitying me or my situation was sharp and uncomfortable. "So if you know anyone in need of new socks, please send them to the Winters sisters. We do darning as well, and we take commissions for other knitted wares."

Might as well drum up more business if I could. "We are always happy for more work."

As I spoke, his eyes swept over me, and I saw the worry come back full force, overtaking the happy relief he had shown before.

My shoulders curled in as embarrassment took over. I glanced down at myself, at my dirt-covered fingers and the faded dress that hung a little loose. I wrung my hands, certain that seeing me here was a stark contrast to seeing me in my starched uniform at Fowler House, well fed and far less burdened than I was now. When I looked back at him, he was examining the cottage, and when his attention shifted back to me, his worry had doubled, crinkling his brow and the corners of his eyes.

I clasped my hands in front of me. Did it look that bad? I wanted to hide my face with my dirty hands, but that would only make me look worse, so instead, I lifted my chin, digging for a confidence I did not feel.

He swallowed hard. "I didn't know that you lived on the estate." His voice held a hollowness that seemed wrong coming from him.

"My father was the blacksmith for years. It's why I thought Cecily and I would be safe coming back here."

He nodded but looked away, a distinct look of devastation on his face that I didn't understand. I examined his clothing once again, the way he looked so put together. The way he clung to the ledger. It was just like the ones I'd seen on his desk. The ledgers he used as steward of Fowler House.

My heart sank. "Nicolai, why are you here?"

His face was turned in profile, and I watched as his throat bobbed up and down. Then he turned to look at me. "I'm here as the estate steward."

My brow rose and pulled in at the same time, stretching the bridge of my nose. "I don't understand."

The fingers that wrapped around his ledger twitched, but he kept still, maintaining his businesslike attitude. "There have been repeat problems with the lease of this house."

I blinked several times but then remembered the document I'd seen. "Yes." For some reason, it was important that he know I wasn't completely ignorant of it. "My sisters told me that my father had fallen behind on the payments for a time, but then they caught up. Right?"

His face pinched, and he spoke with great reluctance. "For a time, yes. But the most recent payment was not made."

I was certain my shock and anxiety were written all over my face, and my lungs felt like they didn't work. Why hadn't I thought of that? Why hadn't I asked about the lease being paid? How had I let that slip past my notice?

Even worse, if Nico were here about the lease... "Nico, are you here to throw my family out of our home?"

He shook his head swiftly. "No. No. I'm just here to ascertain the situation."

I huffed the ghost of a laugh and looked up, trying not to let the stinging in my eyes turn to tears. The situation? The situation was that I didn't know how we were going to come up with the money for the lease, and that, from what I had seen of my father, things were going to get worse, not better. But I couldn't say that. So I gathered my composure and asked, "What do you need to know?"

"Um." He looked down as if consulting his notes, even though he hadn't opened the ledger. "You and your sisters make and sell socks?"

"Yes."

"And what of your father? You said something about smithing?" he asked, as if hopeful that my answer would ease the worry he so obviously felt. No doubt he was

anxious to know that we could cover the lease so that he wouldn't have to worry about the messiness of kicking us out and replacing us with someone who could pay when he was clearly concerned for me.

I could offer no such hope. Instead, my shoulders pulled down, and I had to fight to keep my lips from dipping into a frown. "He works when he can." I didn't mention that in the past two months, he hadn't been able to do any work at all.

Nico shifted where he stood, and I was reminded that I had never invited him inside. Not that I would do that now. My sisters did not need to know of this visit.

He dragged a hand down his face and bit down on his lower lip, clearly frustrated. "I should have known."

"Known what?" I asked, as I was not privy to his thoughts.

"I should have known something was afoot when I was sent here."

"I still don't understand."

He stared at me for several intense moments, his lips pressed tight. "It was Brunson who suggested to Lord and Lady Calderon that I do an audit of all the leased properties."

Brunson? "Why would he—"

"I'm still getting my feet under me with the estate, and I was months away from worrying about whether or not leases were paid up," he said with a wave of his hand. "I'd seen enough to know that some of them weren't, but also that in the past, Mr. Pennsworth had been forgiving and Lord Calderon had been lenient."

His implication started to settle over me. "But not this time?"

He gave an angry shake of his head. "Lord Calderon's affability does not stand up to his wife's determination. When she gets an idea in her head, it must be done."

"And Brunson put this idea in her head," I said, knowing it was true. Lady Calderon looked up to the old butler as a sort of father figure and trusted him in everything. I let out a defeated breath as the weight of hopelessness tugged at my shoulders. "It wasn't enough to sack me. He has to destroy my family as well. Why?" I ground out in frustration. "Why does he hate me?" I pressed the backs of my hands into my eyes, forcing my tears to stay put.

"I will be sure to report back to Lord Calderon that all is well here and that Mr. Pennsworth's approach of patience and leniency should be honored."

I sucked in a breath and dropped my hands so that I could see him. My whole body felt trembly, and I needed to end our conversation before I fell apart completely. "I would appreciate that. We will find a solution, I'm sure." I wanted to believe my own words.

I didn't.

His eyes were pitying when he said, "Perhaps I could help somehow."

I immediately shook my head, his pity tearing at my confidence and pride.

"You've done enough. You will have the money soon, Mr. Closs."

His chin pulled back, like I'd shocked and hurt him. "Annabelle?"

"Is there anything else, sir?" I needed him to go. I needed to be left to my own thoughts and worries.

He frowned, studying my face for several moments, then dropped his eyes and nodded at the ground. "No. No, nothing else. I will let his lordship know that the setback is only temporary, just like last time, and that nothing need be done right now." He looked back up, nodding a reassurance that I could not believe.

I gave a stiff nod, trying to be relieved that he seemed to be on my side, but the relief wouldn't come.

"I truly am glad to see you, Annabelle. But I'm sorry it's under these circumstances."

My eyes stung, and I pressed my lips to keep from falling apart in front of him. I wanted to tell him that I felt the same. I wanted to say I had missed him and that the obvious concern he felt made me feel not so alone. Instead, I said, "If you will excuse me, Mr. Closs, I have work to do."

My tone was cool and decisive. I could tell he wanted to linger, but after several drawn-out moments, he gave a meager smile and left.

I turned back to our little garden and cried into the dirt.

THE MARKET WAS a cacophony—vendors haggling with customers, wagons rumbling over the cobbles, the sizzle of meat, and sounds of animals calling out. It was the second Thursday in October, and I had spent the morning wandering among the booths. A basket holding a variety of socks that my sisters had knitted was strung across my body with a strap. We didn't have the tables and canopy required for setting up a real booth at market, but we didn't really need one. I could sell our wares this way. It was more tiring, walking around in the sun with the heavy basket weighing on my shoulder, but it was the least I could do. My time was better spent selling here than trying to knit. Each time I sat down with the needles and yarn, my eyes just kept cutting over to my sisters, comparing their speed and skill to my dismal attempts. I didn't bother trying to make socks. Instead, I made scarves and even managed a few hats, though those were harder. My fingers would speed up, even though I told myself not to, and inevitably I would miss a stitch, or drop a stitch, or lose count. The knit would be too tight or too loose. I hated not being reliable.

The sun was getting high, and I was proud of the number of socks I'd sold. It was clear that many of the villagers were familiar with my sisters' work. I even had a small stack of socks that people had brought for me to take home and darn, saying they'd pick them up at the cottage later in the week. My sisters' accomplishments filled me with pride, and yet I knew it wasn't enough. Now that Papa couldn't work, there was simply no way for us to pay the lease and feed ourselves.

So we hadn't eaten much at all over the past week and a half. While I hadn't told Lottie or Grace about Nico's visit, I had asked them to tell me everything they knew about the lease. When were payments due? How much? How close were we to making the payment? It had been a terrifying conversation, and we'd all walked away from it dragging our feet and our hopes with us.

So I'd stopped by the apothecary this morning, hoping to find something that would help my father. The doctor and healer had stopped answering our summons after it became clear we could pay them nothing, but the apothecary continued to listen to our concerns and had tried to give us direction. But when I told him about how my father's balance had worsened and how his vision had started to blur, he told me there was nothing to do. "It sounds as if the sickness has spread to his eyes," the apothecary had said. "I'm sorry, Annabelle. I don't think your father will last much longer."

I'd managed to thank him before I left. I supposed somewhere deep in my mind, I'd considered that my father might not recover, but I'd been stubbornly optimistic for so long that hearing those words from the apothecary left me numb.

So I sold my socks, because what else could I do?

"Miss Winters," someone said from behind, and I turned to see a man in his late thirties with dark hair and sharp features. "Oh," he said in surprise. "You must be the other sister."

A sharp pain lanced my heart at being called the "other," but I shoved it down and forced a smile. "I am. Annabelle Winters." I dipped into a curtsey. "At your service."



“Alexander Lockwood.” He forced the corners of his mouth up, but it was only the semblance of a smile. His eyes were dim and his countenance heavy. I wondered what troubled him.

“I’ll take a pair,” he said, gesturing toward my basket.

My heart gave a little leap. Each sale was exciting. I pulled out several options for him to choose from. We exchanged coins for socks, then he looked at me again. “I’m used to seeing one of your sisters here, knitting away as they sell,” he commented.

“Yes, well, I have been in service for the last few years, so I’m not adept enough to knit and sell at the same time.”

His brow lifted in interest. “Really? What kind of service?”

“I was a maid at a...a house in Norsing.” I didn’t want to mention Fowler House.

“And did you enjoy your position?”

“Sometimes. Though I’m grateful to be back home with my family.”

His mouth smiled, but his eyes remained dim. “Family is important.”

I nodded. “It is.”

“Would you ever consider going into service again?”

“Oh. I—”

“I ask because a friend of mine recently convinced me that I need additional help.” A self-deprecating smile lifted his lips only a little. “I’m a widower, you see. And my children...” He trailed off and cleared his throat, then took a breath and hurried on. “I need to hire a caretaker for my children. Would you, or possibly one of your sisters, consider such a position?”

I stood with my mouth in a little O, my eyes wide and blinking. “You know nothing about me.” And I knew nothing about him.

“Perhaps not. But I’m familiar with your sisters, and I respect your father. Besides, the rest of my staff would keep a close eye on any newcomer until they deem them trustworthy.” His expression was a bit frantic and layered with sadness.

“You must be quite desperate to contemplate hiring me.” And I couldn’t help being suspicious of it. While the chance to take on such a position was tempting, I was in no hurry to join a household unless I thought it would be safe.

He nodded. “I can’t handle the complications of interviews and...” He trailed off again, seeming to reel in his emotions. I wondered how recently his wife had died. “So, I am trusting my instincts. Are you interested?”

“I...don’t know, sir.” Could I even consider it?

He gave a humorless chuckle. “I suppose I can’t expect you to be excited by the prospect at only a moment’s notice. Think on it, and if you’re interested, or if one of your sisters is interested, come to Springmill Farm. It’s only a mile outside town. You would have room and board, of course, and would be caring for four young children.”

I nodded, thunderstruck by the offer, and tucked the information away to think on later.

He turned to go but then looked back. “Will you consider it?”

Perhaps I should have been jumping at the offer. We certainly needed the money. But could I trust an offer from a stranger? And even if I could, I didn’t want to leave home again.

He looked at me with tired desperation, and though my instinct was to help him, such a choice could not be made until I spoke with my sisters. “Yes, I will. Thank you, sir.”

He gave a weak smile and then walked away.

Was I a fool not to take the offer right away? If it were only me I had to worry about it, I would say yes immediately. But I was finally back home with my sisters, and they needed me. There was so much that they couldn't do at home because they were so devoted to knitting the goods we sold. And once I had the house and land in better order, I'd be able to help with the knitting as well. Papa needed more and more help each day. I shook my head. It was no use thinking in circles. I'd have to wait until I got home and spoke with Grace and Charlotte.

I set the strange encounter out of my mind and went back to walking around, trying to catch the eye of anyone I passed so that I could smile and offer up my wares. It was exhausting, but at least it worked. By mid-afternoon, I'd sold all the socks I'd brought with me, and I let my feet wander through the other stalls, torturing myself by looking at all the pretty things and delicious foods offered. I kept my hands tightly clasped over my stomach, knowing I couldn't buy anything. I ignored the sellers who called out to me, presenting their wares for inspection.

A man stepped into my meandering path, and when I turned to go around him, I realized it was Nico. My heart sped up at the sight of him. I'd regretted the way I'd treated him; my circumstances were not his fault, and it was unfair to blame him.

He looked out of place here in the market. Yes, there were people from all classes walking among the booths, but the vast majority of people were of the lower class—servants sent to fetch foodstuffs for the houses in which they worked. I wondered what had brought him here, but that curiosity was overshadowed by the lightness that filled my chest at the sight of him. How was it I could be so happy to see him when our last encounter had been so disheartening?

I'd been humiliated to have him come to my home and see how destitute I was, but more than a week had passed since then, and one thing remained true—I craved Nico's company. I craved the kindness of his eyes and the reassurance I felt at his very presence.

He didn't see me yet, and for a moment, I considered scurrying by without a word, knowing that I looked even worse than I had a week ago. Hard labor and little food will change anyone's appearance. But despite my embarrassment, I wanted to speak with him.

So I summoned my courage. "Nico?" I asked in a voice that sounded much too plaintive, too desperate. Because I was.

He looked over, his brow jumping in surprise. "Annabelle?"

"I see they've unchained you from your desk once again."

He smiled at my bad joke. "Yes, indeed. My good behavior earned me an afternoon of freedom."

I wanted to keep teasing, but I owed him an apology first. "I'm sorry for the way I treated you the other day. It is not your fault, and—"

"Please, think nothing of it. They were...unfortunate circumstances."

The familiar ball of terror clenched in my chest, but I shoved it away, determined to soak in the ease and light that Nico seemed to carry with him. "I would not expect to find a steward at market," I remarked, tilting my head in curiosity.

He chuckled. "I was supposed to meet someone here. He sells leather goods and tack for horses. The stable master is unhappy with the quality we've been getting from our usual supplier and wanted to seek out other options. The man agreed to meet me here, but he hasn't shown." He looked about the market, likely wondering if the man might show up at the last moment. "I bought enough lunch for he and I to share while we spoke"—he held up a sack—"and still he is not here. But enough about me," he hurried to say. "Are you well?" His brow dipped in that familiar look

of concern.

My chest tightened, and I wished very much that I had the right to ask him to hug me. If he did that, things might not feel so bad. But despite the odd kiss that he and I had shared, I knew I had no claim on Nico, so instead I forced my face into a smile and said, "Well enough. I am just on my way home. I've sold all my wares and need to get back to help my sisters."

"Might I walk with you? Since the supplier never came, I should return to the estate."

*Yes!* I wanted to yell but held myself in check. I shouldn't welcome his company. It would only hurt when he left and never came back. But I couldn't bring myself to give up this moment. "Um." I hitched the strap of my basket higher on my shoulder. "Very well," I agreed.

"Might I carry that for you?" he asked, gesturing to the basket.

I shook my head. "It's light and empty now, and you've got your own burden," I said, gesturing to the sack he held.

He suppressed a smile. "A bit of food is hardly a burden."

I shrugged. The basket really was light, and having something to cling to felt like a comfort right now.

"Very well. Lead the way," he said with a wave of his hand.

I wove through the crowd, trusting that he would follow. It was a relief to step into a narrow street and out of the din and discord of the market.

He fell into step beside me, and though his presence was confusing, it was also a comfort. "So what will you do with the rest of your afternoon? Is it back to work for you? Or will you try your hand at skipping through fields and gathering wildflowers?"

He snorted a laugh, and I was grateful that he and I could still find things to laugh over. "You know, I had considered doing a bit of skipping, but I must admit, my form is rather lacking. I would need to employ a tutor to ensure I get it right."

"Ah. An excellent notion. I do believe little Amelia down the way could whip you into shape. She's seven and has been skipping and flower picking for nearly all her life."

"Is there a certain uniform for such things?" he asked, his brow furrowed in serious concentration. "I would hate to show up unprepared."

My laughter bubbled up, but I managed to hold it in. "Yes, of course. You're right to think ahead. I do believe the uniform would require two braids tied with pretty bows, a skirt that's full with lots of spinning capability, and a pinafore over the top with pockets to keep all the flowers."

He let out a guffaw. "Oh dear, I might be in over my head."

"I could help you with the braids if you like," I offered.

He looked down at me with laughter in his eyes. "I think I may have to stick with what I know. The village could not handle the sight of me in a pinafore. I'll simply have to find a way to occupy myself back at Fowler House."

"How are things at Fowler House? Has everything simply fallen apart without me?"

I looked up to see if my teasing had made him smile as I'd intended. Instead, he stared ahead, looking almost broken. "It's not right."

His simple words made my throat burn with emotion, but I swallowed it down. "I have to remind myself daily that I can only control myself. If I held a grudge every time a person made a decision that affected me, my entire life would be consumed with grudges. Life doesn't care if we are too busy to deal with challenges; it will throw them at us anyway." We were thankfully approaching the

fork in the road. I had no wish to hear him lament my situation. I didn't want his pity. "I suppose this is goodbye." The path to the left led to my cottage. The road to the right went to the big house.

"I will walk you the rest of the way if you don't object."

I blinked in surprise. "No, of course *I* don't object, but..."

"But what?"

"But why don't *you* object?" I faced him, my brow dipping in confusion.

"What do you mean?" he asked, as if it were truly confusing.

I huffed and then gestured between us. "This isn't normal, and you know that."

His expression softened. "It's not normal to look after a friend?"

"Is that what I am to you?" I challenged.

"Isn't it?" he challenged back. "I understand that a friendship such as ours is perhaps not usual, but is it so outside the realm of possibility that you doubt my sincerity?"

I pressed my lips, frustrated by his answer, and crossed my arms across my stomach before fixing him with a look. "Are you doing this because you feel guilty?"

He rocked back a little, and I knew I was right. "You offered to help before, but my circumstances aren't your fault, and I'm not your responsibility." Most of all, the last thing I wanted from him was pity.

He paused for several moments, ordering his thoughts. "I offered my help because I feel terrible about the circumstances of your termination. But the reason I am walking beside you right now is because I like walking with you." He looked sincere, but he also looked sad and worried. I didn't want him to be here because I made him sad. My bruised, lonely heart wanted so much more than that, even though I had no right.

So I just shook my head, bewildered. "I don't understand you."

"Just let me walk with you. Please?"

There was really no question. Of course I wanted him to walk with me. So I nodded, and we once again fell into step.

"I don't understand you either," he said after several moments.

"I am quite the mystery," I said, trying to lighten the mood.

"I am in earnest. You so willingly work to take care of everyone else, all the time."

"And that's confusing?"

"No, it's noble. The confusing bit is that you hand out favors to everyone and accept none for yourself."

"I help because others need it. But I'm fine. I'm capable. I have sisters who love me. I have a firm mind."

"That doesn't mean you don't need help."

I sighed, but I didn't want to argue, so I smiled at him instead. "You are very kind to care."

"I *do* care."

His firm words and earnest expression made me swallow. "I know." I just wished that more was possible.

We fell silent while we covered the last bit of ground leading to my cottage. The blacksmith forge that sat a short ways from the cottage was cold and neglected, a reminder of all my father had been and could not be anymore.

I stopped on the path but didn't go into the yard. "Thank you for walking with me," I said, hoping he would leave.

"I'd like to meet your sisters," he said. "If you don't mind."

I looked to the house, then at Nico and back again. Was I willing to let him in? Did I want him to know how empty our cottage was? Did I want to welcome the extra pity such knowledge would provoke?

A loud part of me screamed that no, I did not want that. But a quieter part of me begged to be honest, begged for the chance to share my burden with someone who professed to care for me. I sighed and shook my head, giving in. "You've already caught me hiding behind curtains and viciously beating rugs. Come in."

He gave me a small smile but remained quiet as he followed me inside. The door groaned as I pushed it open, and I braced myself for what he would see.

Stepping inside, I was glad that my sisters and I had a propensity for tidiness. Of course, it was not hard to keep things in order when you had so few belongings.

Grace and Charlotte each sat in a chair, their hands working away with their knitting needles, their expressions falling into matching expressions of surprise when they saw Nico come in behind me. My eyes drifted to the fireplace and the sleeping pallet that was still laid out in front of it. I hurried over and gathered the blankets, bundling them and setting them aside.

I tried not to let the heat rise to my cheeks, but there was no stopping it. It was humiliating to look around my home and see it the way that he must see it. Before I'd gone away to Norsing, the three of us had been small enough to all sleep up in the loft together, but now that we were full grown, there wasn't room for me with my sisters, so I spent my nights in front of the fireplace, which we only lit on the coldest of nights.

"Mr. Closs," I said, gesturing toward my sisters. "This is Grace and Charlotte."

They both dipped their heads and said, "How do you do?" in unison.

"I'm well, thank you," he said with a genuine smile. "It's a pleasure to meet both of you. I had the privilege of working with your sister at Fowler House and was happy to see her again at the market today." He set his sack down on our table and looked about. "And is your father about?" Nico asked, unaware of the weight that question held. "I would love to meet him."

I looked to my sisters, and Grace gave a swift shake of her head directed at me before answering Nico. "He's lying down at the moment. He's been having trouble with his balance lately."

I swallowed at the understatement.

"Ah, well," Nico responded, "perhaps I can meet him next time."

"Will there be a next time, Mr. Closs?" Charlotte asked. Charlotte so often looked older than her fourteen years, but the way she scrunched her brow and pouted her lips made her look just as young as she was.

Nico seemed unruffled as he said, "I should think so. You never know when you'll need an excellent pair of new socks."

That managed to pull a smile from both of my sisters.

"Well, I won't keep you," he declared. "I can see you are all busy, and I would only be in the way if I stayed. Good day, Charlotte, Grace." He nodded to each in turn before shifting his focus to me, his features softening when he did so. "Annabelle."

"Nico."

He gestured to the sack he'd been carrying with him, which now rested on the table. "I'll leave this if you don't mind. Otherwise, it might go to waste."

A lump jumped into my throat, and I barely managed to whisper a "thank you."

He gave me a smile and then let himself out.

I stared at the closed door, wondering why I felt the mad instinct to run after him. It was probably just that his company had been soothing, and I didn't have

much of that lately. When I managed to shake off my wayward thoughts and look about for some knitting I could do, I encountered the curious stares of my sisters.

"What?" I asked, even as my cheeks heated.

"You brought a man back from market," Grace said.

"He was walking back this way anyway. He was just being a gentleman, walking me home."

"That was kind of him."

It had been kind, and odd, especially since it wasn't on his way. This whole day had been odd. I didn't want to tell my sisters what the apothecary had said, and there was also the strange incident with the farmer who had offered the position.

"What else happened?" Grace asked, her hands continuing her work. She didn't even have to pay attention to it; she knit as easily as she breathed. "You have that crease in your brow that shows up when you're keeping too much to yourself."

I sighed, deciding that telling them about the widower was better than telling them about the apothecary. "There was a farmer who offered me a job."

"Doing what? Harvesting?"

"Watching his children. I guess his wife died and—"

"You should take it," Grace said abruptly, her needles stopping.

"But..." I floundered, shocked by her vehemence. "You don't even know who it is. What if he's not trustworthy?"

"Who is it?" she all but demanded.

"Mr. Lockwood at Springmill Farm."

"Take it," Grace insisted. "Mr. Lockwood has always been kind. He and his wife were a lovely couple."

"We have work to do here."

Grace shook her head. "We can't give up an opportunity like this. That position would mean food for you, Annabelle. You'd have a bed and steady wages."

She seemed so excited by the idea. "Then you take it," I said, remembering that he'd offered it to any of us. "You'd be wonderful at caring for children." And she deserved the chance to live in the comfort of a big house. "I'll keep knitting with Charlotte, and you could go—"

"You're not fast enough, Belle," Grace said with an apologetic smile, her hands starting to work again. "If you were as quick as we are and could produce as much as I do, then I'd take that position in a moment, but you're not. You'll bring in more money by working for this man."

Pain sliced through me, but I fought to hide it. I wasn't used to being the dead weight, the one who couldn't provide. For so long, I had been the one everyone relied on. Being a maid had allowed me to help my family without being a burden. Yet, while I had done everything in my power to work and help since I'd been home, to prove that I was still an asset, Grace was telling me that I was the burden now. I was the one who had to be taken care of, and I hated it. My sisters were right, and they were being perfectly kind about it, but it gouged at my pride. "I..."

Grace paused in her knitting and put a hand on my knee. "This is a good thing."

"Maybe," I conceded.

"Look at this!" Charlotte shouted, and we turned to see her digging through the sack that Nico had left on the table. "It's *food*. Bread. Cheese. Look!" She held up an apple, her eyes shining bright. "Can you remember the last time we had fruit?" She brought it to her nose and inhaled with her eyes closed.

I smiled, happy that she was happy and grateful for his kindness even though I bristled at the thought of needing his charity. "We should save the cheese and apples. They'll keep. But we might as well eat the bread now."

Charlotte squealed and bounced on her toes before pulling the bread from the bag. As she did, a distinct clinking sound reached our ears, and we all looked on the floor, wondering what had fallen and made the sound.

Charlotte bent and picked up something from the ground, her mouth agape as she stared at it. "It's a piece of silver," she said, her words sending a ripple of shock through me. Then she turned and shoved her hands back inside the bag, feeling around on the bottom. Her eyes went wide, and she pulled her hand out to look at what she'd grabbed. "It's *two* pieces of silver," she said, her eyes wide and unbelieving. Then her mouth turned up into a huge smile, and she hugged the coins to her chest. "He must have left them. Belle. Your Mr. Closs is a saint!"

"No." The word slipped from my mouth as I took the coins from her hand.

"What do you mean, no?" she asked, bewildered.

"No," I said as I hurried to the front door and out into the yard, looking down the road to see if I could spot Nico walking, but of course he was nowhere to be seen.

"What are you doing?" Charlotte demanded, grabbing my arm and yanking me to a halt.

"We have to give it back," I said. Him leaving us a bit of food was one thing, but leaving *two silver pieces*... It wasn't right.

"Are you mad?" Charlotte grabbed my wrist, pried my fingers open, and yanked the coins from my hand, angry. "Why would we give them back?"

"We can't take his money." I reached for the coins again, but she put her fist behind her back.

"We certainly *can* keep it. He obviously left it on purpose. He's kind and wants to help."

"But..."

"But what?" She stared at me, her eyes angry. "But it hurts your pride? Is that it?"

"No, I just—"

"Yes," she insisted. "That is exactly what this is about. You and your pride. But let me tell you something, Belle. You haven't been here long. You think you've gotten a taste of desperation, but I can promise you that you haven't truly felt the sting yet. You may have pride enough left to turn away a gift that can pay the remainder of the lease payment and feed us for *weeks*, but I don't." The tremble in her voice and the mettle in her eyes showed a pain and desperation that I'd never seen there before. Had she been hiding it from me? "My pride is *gone*. Grace's pride is gone. Our pride is in the ground, as cold and dead as Mama."

I winced at her callous comparison, and I wondered if she had any idea how much it hurt me. I hadn't been given the chance to grieve Mama with them before Papa had sent me away. I'd mourned alone.

"You're used to taking care of us," she continued. "I understand that. You aren't used to being the one who needs help, but you'd better *get* used to it. You're not better than us now, Belle. The sooner you realize that, the better off you'll be." She turned her back on me and stomped back into the house, leaving me feeling small and ashamed.

FOR THE REST of the day, I tried to be pleasant and failed. Lottie wouldn't look at me, and I couldn't look at Grace, not when I knew that she thought all my efforts to contribute here at home had been for nothing. I was only helpful when I was away from home.

I let my options tangle and twist in my head the entire afternoon, waiting for them to fall into a comfortable position, but no matter how I twisted things, the fact remained that I did not want to leave my sisters.

I had told Papa good night and waited until Lottie climbed up into the loft before I broached the subject with Grace. She was trying to finish one last sock, using the dim light of a lamp. As I sat beside her, I realized how old she looked. It was hard to see the younger sister I'd always known in the woman who sat with such weight and determination on her shoulders at only seventeen. "I know you think I should take the job," I started quietly, and her needles paused. "But I don't know if that's the best decision."

She looked up at me. "Why not?"

Her frank question made me feel like I was being interrogated by a constable. I supposed I would have to plead my case. "If I'm here to help with Papa and take care of things, that means you two can focus on the knitting, and—"

"What do you suppose we were doing before?" Grace asked, sounding insulted. "I—"

"We know how to make it work here at home. It's hard, there's no doubt about it. But we can manage Papa. We can feed ourselves. What we *can't* do is make enough money to pay the lease."

"But the coins that Nico—"

"They'll get us through next month. And then what?"

"We could sell the forge," I suggested. It was my best idea, and the only one I thought was viable.

"I've tried," she said with a hard edge in her voice, and my hope withered. "But no one will negotiate with me. They want to speak with Papa, and he won't do it." Frustration rolled off of her. "Either because he thinks he'll get better or because he believes they're trying to swindle him. It doesn't matter why. *I've tried.*"

I opened my mouth, hoping for something useful to come out, but I was out of ideas. "It feels like I'm abandoning you," I said, though it wasn't true. It wasn't about me abandoning them. I understood that money was money, and we desperately needed it, but I couldn't help feeling like I was being shoved out of my home. Again.

"You're *not*. You're doing what needs to be done. Please, Belle. Take the job."

I pressed my lips but nodded, hating the hole that felt like it was expanding in my heart. This felt too much like the last time I'd been sent away. Papa had insisted it was for the best, and I understood why he did it, but it still left me feeling like I'd been cast out of my own family. Like they didn't need me. Like they didn't...want me.

Now it was happening again. They were pushing me out—for my good, for their good, for some strange good that I didn't understand because it didn't *feel* good. It



wasn't right or comforting to be told I needed to leave my home. It was devastating.

But I'd do it anyway.

I swallowed down all the hurt that was fighting to get out and gave one stiff nod. "Very well."

The way the tension slipped from her shoulders made me feel only a little better. "Thank you, Annabelle."

I bent my head in resignation and went to bed soon after.

In the morning, I woke early. I slipped into my father's room to tell him I planned to accept a position caring for someone's children. His only response was a vague, "Oh. Very well," before he went back to scowling at the washbasin beside his bed.

I walked to Springmill Farm, which took about an hour, admiring the fields as I crossed Mr. Lockwood's property. I was greeted at the door by a housekeeper who seemed to have been half expecting me.

"Right this way," she said and led me to a study. She opened the door after a quick knock. "Miss Winters to see you," was all she said before leaving me in the doorway.

Mr. Lockwood smiled with relief when he saw me. "You'll take the job?"

"I will."

We discussed the particulars, and then he studied me. "Do you have your belongings with you?"

"No, sir. I walked."

He sent a wagon to take me back so that I could gather my things and move to the farmhouse that very afternoon.

After I'd stowed my small gathering of belongings in the wagon, I went back inside and took a moment to fortify myself before stepping into my father's room. "Papa?"

He looked up from where he sat in a chair. He was carving something, and I tried not to let the shaking of his hands while he held a knife make me nervous. "Annabelle," he said, seeming pleased to see me.

"I'm going now."

He looked surprised. "Going where?"

"I've taken another job, remember? I'll be living at a farm close by from now on."

"I thought you were here to help your sisters," he said, sounding upset.

I braced myself. "Yes, Papa. I have been, but now I've taken another job that will earn more. I'm not very good at helping with the knitting." I hated admitting as much, but I hoped it would help him understand.

"So you're leaving?"

"Yes, Papa."

"Abandoning us again?"

His words felt as though he'd stabbed his knife into my quivering heart. I knew he would never have said such a thing if not for his illness, yet it cut deep. "I am not abandoning you. This will be good for all of us."

"Go then," he said with a harsh sniff. "You're no good to us here anyway."

I wanted to argue, wanted to rail against the false accusation. How dare he suggest that I had abandoned them before when he had been the one to push me out the door? Instead, I left his room and swallowed the knot in my throat.

"He didn't mean it," Grace said from her spot at the table.

"I know," I forced myself to say. My head did know it, but my heart felt every jagged tear inflicted by his words. My sisters had told me of the many awful things

he'd said to them. Accusations and insults. One moment he'd be telling them how lovely and loved they were, and the next he'd order them out of his sight. It was a bit like dealing with a toddler who would scream at you one moment and then smother you in kisses the next.

Grace's smile was commiserating. "I'll miss you."

I crossed to the table and leaned down to hug her. "I'm sorry I have to go."

"You're doing what's best for all of us. You are. Plus, now that you're not working at the big house, you'll be able to sit with us on Sundays."

"That will be nice, won't it?" I didn't tell her that I hadn't arranged such things with Mr. Lockwood yet. I only hoped it would be true.

I gathered the last small satchel, which was filled with knitting supplies. Just because I was not at home did not mean I couldn't knit. Then I stepped outside, where Charlotte waited, her arms wrapped around her thin frame, a well-worn kerchief covering her hair as she looked out at the trees that were half orange, half green.

I stepped up beside her, but she just stared ahead, letting the cool breeze tangle in her curls. "I don't think I'm better than you," I finally said. It was something I'd been wanting to say for the past two days, but I hadn't summoned the courage until now.

Lottie turned to me, a frown marring her face. "I didn't really mean it," she said as tears welled in her eyes.

I reached for her, and she flung her arms around my neck, sobbing. "It's all right, dear. Things will be fine."

"I hate that you're going."

"Me too."

"And I miss Papa," she admitted in a whisper that I only heard because her chin rested on my shoulder.

My eyes burned. "I know. I do too."

"One minute, he's there, but I never know how long it's going to last. I hate it when he snaps at me for no reason, but it scares me almost as much when he just stares at the wall."

"I know," I said, feeling idiotic for not having anything better to say to comfort my sister. "I'm so proud of you, though. I'm proud of both of you for all that you've done and everything you've sacrificed for him and for me. We're going to be all right. We are."

She pulled back, wiping her face on her sleeve. "Do you promise?"

"Yes," I said, even as I doubted my own words. "I promise."

Then I gave her one more squeeze and went to climb into the small wagon, driven by one of Mr. Lockwood's servants. As the wagon rolled ever closer to my new home, I desperately hoped that I hadn't just lied to my sister.

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Mr. Alexander Lockwood was pleasant and respectful, and he clearly loved his children and sincerely mourned the death of his wife.

"I'm grateful you were willing to come," he said as he led me up the stairs. "I know I need the help, but I didn't know how to go about finding someone I could trust. When I saw you at the market, I just took a chance."

"I'm truly grateful for the position."

He led me to the nursery and introduced me to his children. They ran to him when he entered, chattering away, but as soon as they saw me, they quieted and closed off.

After he'd explained to the children who I was and why I was there, he let the housekeeper show me the house. She showed me the little bedroom attached to the nursery that would be mine before showing me the rest of the house. I would sometimes dine with the children and sometimes dine with the servants when the children joined their father for occasional meals.

It was clear from that first evening that it would be a good position, but I couldn't help the guilt that ate at the edges of my spirit. I wanted my sisters to have the chance to be so comfortable and protected, but once again, I had to leave them behind. I hated that it couldn't be one of them here instead of me, but I reminded myself that at least this way I was helping, and I turned my attention to getting to know the children whose welfare I was now responsible for.

Over the next two weeks, I adjusted to the children's different personalities and preferences. The baby, Bernard, was not even a year old and wanted nothing but to be held all day. The other three were not so accepting of me. Three-year-old Ruby resented my presence and liked to hide from me. I often had to leave the tending of little Ruby to her older siblings because she wouldn't let me near. Violet was nearly five and she watched me with little Bernard cuddled in my lap and seemed to be envious of it, but not so envious that she was willing to approach me herself. She let me feed and dress her and overall was pleasant and obedient, but her little eyes told me that she ached for more. I was confident that, in time, she would drop her guard and let me give her some of the comfort she so clearly craved.

Arthur was six and seemed to consider himself the man of the house. He was protective of himself, his siblings, and even his father. He was also determined to be fiercely independent. "I can do it myself" was his most common refrain, whether it was about reading a book or putting on his shoes.

At the moment, it was about a book. "I know how to read," he said with a straight back and a tense little mouth. It was an expression I'd become familiar with over the past week.

I was glad he didn't need my help reading, because I would be no help at all. I couldn't read. And that gave me an idea. I sat down on the floor beside him. "Do you want to know a secret?"

His eyes cut over to me, and I could see the curiosity there. "What secret?"

I leaned in a bit and said in a whisper, "I can't read."

This bit of information caught his attention, and he turned to me fully. "You can't?"

I shook my head. "Most servants like me never learn. Housekeepers and butlers know how because they must know for their jobs, but maids don't need to know."

His forehead was furrowed in a very grown-up way, and I resisted the urge to smile. "I could teach you," he said with sudden determination.

I was so shocked by his bold offer that tears sprang to my eyes, and I had to blink them back. I quickly swallowed down my emotion and gave a firm nod. "You look like you would be an excellent teacher," I said. The desperate hope that bubbled up was potent. Ever since my mother had died, I'd wished I'd taken the time to learn how to read. Would this young boy actually give me the chance?

It was a stroke of genius for several reasons. More his genius than mine. I thought the idea would give him a chance to trust me and let me in. And it did do that, but his interest in teaching me didn't wane as I had feared it would. He was a patient and determined little teacher, and when he found a word that he couldn't figure out, he'd simply declare that he would ask his father and share the answer with me the next day.

Not only was Arthur warming up to me, but as the days went by, Violet kept edging closer to me. She was curious about why I didn't already know how to read, and there were several times when she would look over our shoulders and sound out a word before I was able to, clearly proud of herself and wanting to show off her bit of knowledge.

I was thrilled, not only with the progress I was making with the children, but I was actually learning how to read. Not enough that I would be comfortable telling any other adult that I could read, but I was starting to piece things together. I could recognize most of the letters, though some of them still hadn't stuck in my mind.

Now it was the end of October, and I'd been at Springmill for three weeks. The children and I were sitting on the plush rug in the nursery and Arthur was waiting for me to sound out a word when Violet once again came close.

"Hmm, I'm not sure about this one. Violet," I said, looking at her from where I sat on the ground and moving my arm behind her to try to include her in our circle. "Do you know this one?"

Violet shocked me by stepping forward and sitting right in my lap so that she could take the book in her own hands and study the word.

I froze for a moment and then carefully put my arms around her little body. She melted into me, curling her body closer and laying her head on my chest.

I was elated and triumphant. There was nothing quite like earning the trust of a child. Now, if only I could get Ruby to trust me.

MR. LOCKWOOD HAD been amenable to allowing me the same days off as I'd had at Fowler House, which meant Sunday mornings and the first day of each month.

It was November first—my first day off—and though I'd been here little more than three weeks, the children trailed after me like little ducklings as I gathered a satchel and headed out the door. A maid stopped them at the threshold, and they waved their goodbyes, though Ruby did so from halfway behind the door.

Part of me was anxious to get home and be with my sisters. Another part of me was worried about what I would find. Was my father still angry with me? How much worse would his condition be?

My eyes were fixed on the dirt path at my feet when the call of "Annabelle!" made me jump.

My feet stumbled to a stop, and I turned to see Nico approach on horseback. The way he sat atop the beast, his back straight and his clothing fine, made me forget what I was doing and where I was going. Speaking of which... "What are you doing here?" I asked. Fowler House was on the other side of the village.

"I was consulting with the farm manager at Springmill, just back that way," he said, turning in his saddle so he could gesture toward the farm.

I looked back the way I'd come, not quite able to make his explanation click into place. "You were at Springmill?"

He nodded, leaning forward on his saddle horn. I could just barely see the puffs of his breath in the chilly air. "Lord Calderon has asked for ideas on how to improve his crop yields, and Springmill is one of the most successful farms in the area."

"Oh," I said dumbly.

"What about you? I didn't expect to run into you so far from your cottage."

"I work for him."

His brow shot up, and he grinned. "Do you?"

"Yes." I sounded unsure, probably because I didn't understand why he seemed so pleased or why he was dismounting his horse.

He swung down and gathered the reins in his hands then stepped up beside me. "Might I walk with you a ways?" he asked, looking hopeful.

"Yes, of course," I said, because it seemed like he truly wanted to walk with me, and I had no objections. We had, after all, established that we were friends, hadn't we?

Also, I couldn't help the way I wanted to stare whenever he was around. There was a kindness in his eyes that pulled at my soul, and his tall frame and confident air made me feel protected and not so alone.

It was a lovely way to spend a morning, strolling with Nico. His warm presence combined with my cloak chased away the chill in the air.

We fell into an easy rhythm walking by one another, and the silence was comfortable, but I longed to hear his voice rumbling beside me. I wanted to know more about him. "How did you become a steward at such a young age?"

He rubbed a hand over his beard. "Do I look that much like a schoolboy?"

I rolled my eyes at him. “Hardly a schoolboy. But you must admit, stewards are usually much older.”

“You’re right,” he conceded, “but my father was a steward, and not only did he start training me from a young age, but I took to it with vigor.” His face lit with interest and excitement, and I noticed, once again, how handsome he was.

“Everything about it appealed to my mind. The numbers, the organization, the different ways I could help to improve the land, the experience of the employees, the business, all of it. Every day working feels like a wonderfully complex puzzle that I must solve. So, naturally, I became adept much more quickly than the average pupil because the learning didn’t feel like a chore.”

I was impressed and enchanted and only a little bit jealous that he found such joy in his work. “I can’t imagine keeping all of that information in my head. Perhaps your job isn’t *just* about counting things.”

He grinned but said, “No, it’s pretty much just counting things.”

I smiled at his jest. Honestly, the thought of all his responsibilities was overwhelming, and as I tried to imagine him at work, I couldn’t help wondering about Fowler House. My brow furrowed, wondering if Brunson had found someone else to punish unfairly. “How are things at Fowler House? How is Willa?”

He gave a sober tip of his head as he considered. “Things are well enough, though I’m certain Willa misses your epic battle scenes.”

I smiled a little. “And Mrs. Thornton?”

“Just as crisp and meticulous as always.” He hesitated, seeming to argue with himself before he continued. “And of course, Brunson is still stoic and silently miserable. Though he doesn’t seem to be tormenting anyone lately.”

I tried to hide it, but I sighed in relief. One of my worries since I’d left was that Brunson would turn his cruelty on someone less able to handle it.

Nico shaded his eyes and looked up at the sky. “It’s a bit chilly, but the sun is peeking out. Are you in a hurry to get home, or could you spare a few minutes to sit in this patch of sun for a spell?” he asked, gesturing to a large fallen log on the side of the path that was washed in cheery sunshine.

I *had* been in a hurry, but with Nico here, I didn’t wish to hurry at all. “I’d like to sit.” Plus, I was terrified that when I returned, I would discover my father was far worse off than he’d been only a few weeks ago.

Nico tied his horse’s reins to a nearby tree and gestured toward the log. We both sat down.

“How are you finding your position with Mr. Lockwood? Does the work suit you?”

I nodded. “Yes. It’s going well. I just wish one of my sisters could have taken it.”

“Why is that?”

I took in a lungful of air as I contemplated how much to tell him. I supposed at this point, there was little to be gained from holding things back. “Because once again I find myself in a more comfortable living situation than they do,” I said, guilt coating my voice. “Once again, I’m well fed and comfortable while they barely have enough to eat, and are scrounging for firewood and...” I trailed off, worried I would seem ungrateful if I enumerated the difficulties with my father. “But now I can go home, bring them some of my earnings, and things will be a little better,” I said with an overly cheerful smile.

“I’m glad it’s working out.” He looked down at his hands, brushing them back and forth. “And I’m sorry for your sisters’ struggles.”

"They appreciated the coins you left for them," I said, watching him carefully, wondering if he would grin like it was a joke, or perhaps deny it.

Instead, he glanced up and gave me a faint smile before looking away again, as if he would rather not be thanked. "What of your father?" he asked, changing the subject. "Has he been able to work?"

The ever-present pain and fear that I kept carefully contained and controlled seeped out. "My father..." Again, I considered lying or avoiding the question, but I so seldom had a chance to share this burden with anyone but my sisters, and perhaps he would have some sort of insight. "My father is ill and getting worse. For a time, he was able to work on occasion, but now...he can barely stand upright. He can hardly see half the time, and his temper—" I swallowed.

"Is he an angry man?"

I shook my head. "He never was. He was perpetually happy. My mother called him indomitable. He never let life's worries dampen his good humor, but since he became ill"—I blinked, trying to stave off the tears—"that's the hardest part about his condition. I know my father, and even an inability to see or stand would not have made him vicious. They say his mind is sick. And that sickness has stolen my father from me." I brushed away the tear that rolled down my cheek. "I spent five years away from my family. Five years when my father was whole and well. And I'll never get it back."

"Where were you before you came to Fowler House?"

He asked the question out of kindness, I was sure. He was allowing me to gracefully step away from the painful subject of Papa. "I was in Norsing, working for Cecily's uncle."

He jerked back in surprise, and I smiled, just a little gratified that I had succeeded in shocking him. "Cecily? The maid?"

I nodded.

"I don't understand."

I grinned. "Cecily is actually nobility. Her uncle had sold her to a man who wanted to marry her, but she and I were able to make a grand escape." I widened my eyes in dramatic fashion. "I'll always be proud of that."

"She was...sold?"

I nodded. "Forced to sign the betrothal agreement so her uncle could say it was all legitimate." I shook my head, still horrified by what had almost become of her. "I cannot think of a worse fate than being forced to marry someone in that manner." The man she'd been betrothed to was not only more than two decades older than she was, but also terrifying, cruel, and dangerous.

"So you *are* an avenging angel," he said with a tip of his mouth.

I lifted one shoulder. "I just want to protect the people I love."

He caught my eye and held it for several moments, long enough that heat gathered in my chest, and I wasn't sure what it meant. "That's something I'm all too familiar with."

There was a softness to his words that made me want to sigh and lean into him. Instead, I absentmindedly rubbed at my arm where he had tended to the cut at my elbow.

His gaze was pulled down to my fidgeting, and his brow creased. "How is your arm?"

"See for yourself," I said, pulling back my sleeve.

He leaned in to look at it and then brushed two fingers over the scar. "It looks to be healing well."

"Yes, I hardly notice it at all," I managed to say, though his touch made my throat feel thick.

"I'm relieved to hear it. After you were kicked out, I worried that you might not have the supplies you needed to help it heal well." His thumb continued to sweep over the ridge of the scar.

"Grace has made friends with the apothecary," I babbled, needing words to chase away the tension growing between us. "He's helped us on a number of occasions."

Nico pulled his hand away and faced forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "That was a terrifying night, walking into my office and seeing you covered in blood. My heart practically left my chest."

I chuckled as I tugged my sleeve back into place. "You exaggerate. I wasn't covered in blood."

He grinned over at me. "Maybe a bit, but it *was* terrifying. I'll never forget that night."

I paused as he looked at me with that heat in his gaze. Would he never forget that night because of my accident? Or because he'd kissed me? Or was he like me, and the two were so intermingled and wrapped around each other that it was impossible to think about one without thinking of the other?

And did he think about that kiss as much as I did? Did he remember what he'd said to me? And now that he'd brought it up, could I resist asking? My neck flushed hot at the idea of asking him to show me what a real kiss should be like. It was too bold, but I wanted it so desperately that I swallowed and gathered my courage. "Do you remember what you said that night?"

His smile was soft. "I think I said a lot of things."

I took a breath and plowed ahead. "You told me to ask you later," I whispered.

He stilled, and I watched as he took a breath in through his nose, his chest expanding unsteadily. "Did I?"

I dropped my gaze. "When this happened," I said, running my hand over my sleeve and feeling the scar beneath. "When..." I could say *when you kissed me*, but surely he knew what I referred to. "You told me to ask you later, remember?" I stared at my lap, unable to look at him as I said the words.

I heard him swallow. "Yes, I remember." There was a husky quality to his voice that gave me courage.

"It's later, and I'm asking," I managed to say with my last bit of bravery.

He cleared his throat and shifted his seat on the log. "Right." He took a deep breath. "What a first kiss should be like. I believe that was the question."

I nodded, the flush from my neck climbing into my cheeks.

"Well, first of all, one should not be in pain when it happens."

I smiled but wondered if he were only going to explain what a first kiss should be like. Perhaps I was remembering wrong, but I thought he'd said he would *show* me.

"The first kiss you and I shared was overshadowed by your accident, and neither of us was able to enjoy it the way one should."

Despite the chill in the air, the warmth of our sunny spot suddenly felt almost hot, but I was determined to continue this conversation. I wanted to know everything he had to teach me about a first kiss. "So then, ideally, how would a first kiss happen?" I pressed.

"Well...both parties should *want* the kiss to happen."

"And how do they know?" I glanced over at him. "Do they say it out loud?"



He tipped his head to acknowledge that option. "They could, or they could show each other with their actions."

I turned to face him, gathering my bravery like a shawl and wrapping myself in it. "How?" I asked.

He cleared his throat again. "They could direct their attention to the other's mouth." He demonstrated by doing just that, dropping his gaze to my lips.

*Stars*, just that glance made my stomach tighten. "What else?" I wanted to know. I wanted to know it *all*.

"The gentleman could lift the lady's chin with a finger." He hooked a finger beneath my chin and lifted. "And then the man would need to pay attention to how the lady reacted." He swallowed as he looked at my face, no doubt noticing the way I nearly panted in anticipation. "Does the lady pull back or lean in?" he asked.

I leaned in, just a little, because I was too much of a coward to do more. "And the lady? What should she do?"

His breath was coming fast and shallow now. Surely that meant that he was hoping for a real kiss as much as I was, right? "Since the man has initiated contact by lifting her chin, perhaps she could touch him in return. A hand on his arm or—"

I set my hand over his heart, feeling the pounding there, and he sucked a breath through his nose. "Or over his heart," he continued.

I nodded, anxious for him to tell me more. "Would that be enough for the man to know she welcomed the affection?" I asked, my eyes darting to his full lips then back to his eyes.

He nodded, swallowing yet again. "That should do the trick, yes."

"And would he kiss her right away? Or..." My breathing was ragged to my own ears.

"Perhaps," he said as the breeze tugged on my hair, "he might catch a strand of her hair in his hand and tuck it behind her ear." His actions followed his words.

"That way, he has an excuse to skim his fingers down the side of her neck and then push his fingers into her hair."

As he slid his fingers into the hair at the nape of my neck, a shiver ran down my spine, and his eyes flashed with fire when he noticed. "Yes," I breathed out. "I can see how this would be a very good start to a first kiss." My hand that rested over his heart curled in, and I gripped the fabric of his shirt in my fist and tugged just a little. "And surely, the man wouldn't force the lady to actually ask him to kiss her, would he? He would just know." *Please, please end my torment.*

He dipped his head and used the hand at the back of my neck to tug me closer. "Yes, he would know," he said with a little smile before he pressed his mouth firmly to mine. A squeak escaped my throat at the abrupt pressure, and he pulled back, seeming to catch himself. For a moment, I thought that was all I was going to get, but his lips returned to mine almost immediately, this time slower, gentler, achingly tender. He kissed the corner of my mouth, and then just my bottom lip, and then he brushed his lips over mine until I sighed into his mouth.

He'd been right. This was oh so much better than that one frantic, harsh kiss he'd given me when he'd been distracting me from the awful pain in my arm. This was transcendent, magical, and euphoric.

"Was I right?" he whispered against my mouth.

I wasn't even sure what he was asking about, but my answer was firm. "Yes. This is all very right." I leaned in, pressing my own lips to his for the first time instead of just letting him do the kissing. The action seemed to light a fire in him, because he redoubled his efforts, kissing me so thoroughly that I thought I might burst into flames before it was over. And it wasn't just his kisses. The way his

fingers curled over my ear and trailed down my neck left smoldering embers in their wake. The way his large hand rested against the side of my neck while his thumb caressed my jaw. It was all lovely and too much and not enough.

It was a strange relief and also a huge disappointment when he pulled away from me. But then he gathered me against his chest, holding me there as we both allowed our hearts and our breathing to slow.

Eventually, I had to ask, “Are all first kisses like that?”

“No,” he said with conviction. “No, I’ve never experienced a kiss like that, first or otherwise.”

His confession made me smile. So then, it truly had been a shared experience, and I was glad of it. I wondered if I would have more opportunities to share things with Nico, and the idea was like a warm fire in my heart. I wanted to share so many things with this man.

EVENTUALLY, NICO AND I continued on our way, his horse happily plodding along beside us. As we walked closer to the house, Nico pointed to the forge that lay behind the cottage. "Your father is not able to smith anymore?"

I shook my head.

"Why not sell it?"

"We've tried—or, my sister has," I corrected. "Buyers will only negotiate with my father, and his lucidity never lasts long enough for the transaction to go through. At this point, I believe he's scared off or insulted all the potential buyers in the area." I chuckled, but it lacked all humor. "At least, that's what it feels like."

He took a deep breath and puffed out his cheeks before blowing it out. "I'm sorry you're caught in such an impossible position with your father."

"If it was just my sisters I had to worry about..." I trailed off, unable to finish the thought because this conundrum was so large and thick and knotted that I didn't have the words for it.

"I imagine that would be more bearable," he said. "Or at least more straightforward. But trying to help someone who can't see that they need it... I don't know how you do it."

"I don't. It's mostly my sisters."

He didn't say anything, but I could feel that he disagreed with me.

I came to a stop, and Nico stopped with me, his horse poking its head over Nico's shoulder as if wanting to know what was happening. I smiled and scrubbed the backs of my fingers between its nostrils.

I caught Nico's eyes, and the faint smile on his mouth did all sorts of lovely things to my stomach. "I suppose this is where I leave you," he said.

"I think that's best, but I'm glad I was able to walk with you." The words were true, but they were so much smaller than what I truly felt.

"Thank you for indulging me," he said with a smile as his eyes dipped to my mouth.

My voice was raspy as I said, "Good day, Nico."

He caught my hand and pressed a kiss to my knuckles. "Good day, Annabelle."

I blushed furiously and left him on the path while I crossed the hard packed dirt and then entered the cottage.

Grace was putting some bowls in a cupboard. "Well," she said with a smile, "how was it?"

My blush rekindled, worried that she'd been looking out and seen the way Nico and I parted. "What?"

"The job. How's the job?" she clarified. "Are his children hellions?"

I laughed, both in relief and at the idea of the Lockwood children being hellions. "Hardly," I answered as I removed my warm cloak and hat. "They're all quite well behaved, though the three-year-old is not convinced I can be trusted, which makes things difficult."

"But they treat you well?"

I nodded and reached into my satchel, pulling out the six scarves I'd finished. "I know it isn't much, but it's something. Hopefully you can sell them at the winter

festival.”

She took them but looked up at me with concern creasing her brow. “You know you don’t have to keep knitting while you are at work.”

“I know, but I want to help.” I wanted my contributions to be enough, but socks were the most difficult to make and thus made us the most money. Anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of knitting could make a scarf.

“Well, thank you. Every little bit does help.”

I set down my satchel and looked around, my eyes falling on the tiny stack of my mother’s books on the shelf. Perhaps I would be able to sound out some of the words if I tried, but I rejected the idea. Maybe after I’d practiced more, I would make the attempt. For now, there wasn’t time for me to indulge when there was so much to do here at home.

I furrowed my brow, noting Lottie’s absence. “Is Lottie in with Papa?”

Grace shook her head but looked up and gave a tentative smile. “She’s taking a delivery to Mrs. Warner.”

“Mrs. Warner is buying from us now? That’s good.”

“It is. Charlotte was thrilled when I told her.”

I let out a sigh, and a little of my worry eased as I reached for an apron. “It’s wonderful news.” I looked around, mentally cataloging the cleaning I could do. I should get straight to it, but first, I would make my father a priority. “I’ll go say hello to Papa.”

“He’s had a good morning,” she said with a smile. “If you need to discuss anything with him, now would be a good time.”

Did I have anything to discuss with him? After years of being away, I’d stopped counting on my father as a source of advice, and since my return, his sickness made it so that asking for his input was a risk. “I’m sure we’ll have a good visit,” I assured her and crossed to his door. “Papa?” I said as I knocked.

He didn’t answer, which wasn’t unusual. Sometimes he didn’t realize he *should* answer, but when I swung the door open and looked around, he wasn’t there.

The room was empty.

“Grace?” I called, trying not to panic.

“What?”

“Papa isn’t in his room,” I said even as my eyes searched the shadows, hoping to find him hidden, though there was really no place to hide.

The room behind me stilled, and then I heard Grace rushing over. She nearly ran into my back, then pushed past me, throwing back the covers and looking under the bed, though we both knew Papa was too large to hide there.

“When was the last time you saw him?” I asked.

“Um.” She closed her eyes to concentrate. “It was when I came to get his breakfast dishes. I washed them at the rain barrel—”

“So you were out of the house for a while? Could he have left then?”

“I can’t watch him every minute, Annabelle,” she snapped at me, angry and defensive.

“I’m not blaming you,” I said in startled affront. “I’m just trying to figure out what happened.”

She pushed past me again, and I followed her as she ran out of the cottage, yelling, “Papa!”

“Has this happened before?”

“Once,” she answered, turning in circles as she studied the road and the trees.

“But he was standing just outside the door. He hadn’t actually left.”

“He can barely stand up straight. How can he be gone?”

"I don't know," she said, her hands fisted in her hair.

"You check the stream. I'll take the road toward town."

She didn't question me. She just ran off, and I did the same. I'd only gone a few steps before I heard the clang of a hammer on an anvil, and I skidded to a stop, looking toward the smithy. I had to squint to see into the shadows, but Papa was there, a leather apron looped over his head, but untied, and a hammer in his hand.

"Grace!" I shouted. "He's here!" I hurried over to the forge that was surrounded by stone walls on three sides and open on the fourth. Another clang echoed through the air as he brought the hammer down. "Papa?" I called, hoping he would stop his attempts. There was no fire in the forge, and his hammer was falling straight onto the anvil, so I wasn't sure what he was trying to do. "Papa!" I yelled again when I was only a couple steps away.

He finally looked up, and I was shocked to see how clear his eyes were. "Annabelle."

"Yes, Papa," I said in relief. At least he was wearing a coat. It was cold enough that I knew snow would be coming in the next month. "What are you doing?"

He looked down at the hand that held the hammer, then let out a deep sigh and put it down. "Trying to be useful."

My eyes instantly stung. This wasn't his sickness talking. This was my father, a man who used to be strong and confident, realizing what he'd been reduced to. I stepped closer and took his arm, swallowing down my emotions. "You were steady enough to make it out here."

"Yes," he said, allowing me to lead him over to a bench, where he sat down. "For all the good it did me."

"Why were you swinging the hammer?"

He nodded toward the anvil. "I put a mark on it, and then I tried to hit that mark." Devastation was written all over his face. "I didn't manage it. Not even once. And I dropped the hammer twice." I watched as the breeze blew his graying hair across his forehead. "It's maddening. A man should be able to provide for his daughters." There was an angry tremble to his chin.

I swallowed thickly. "We know you would if you could."

He set his hand on my knee, and I could feel it shaking. "To be reduced to this..." he said, and tears pooled in his eyes. "You girls..." He trailed off as his chin trembled. "My body betrayed me. And in betraying me, it's betrayed you three."

Tears spilled down my own cheeks, and I buried my face in his shoulder, trying to take advantage of his presence here and now.

A rustling came from outside, and I looked to see Grace coming to a stop, her eyes flitting from me to my father and back again, clearly not knowing what to think of the situation.

"He's all right," I said simply.

She watched us but said nothing, though the frantic look in her eyes started to fade.

"I'm sorry, Grace," my father said, still sounding teary. "I didn't mean to scare you."

She nodded a little, but I could see her struggling to maintain her calm.

"We'll be inside shortly," I said.

She nodded again and immediately turned to go inside. I would give her several minutes before I encouraged Papa to go inside. It was clear that his illness was taking a toll on all of us.

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I closed the door to my father's room and turned back to Grace. "Is Lottie back?"

"Not yet." The way she attacked her knitting made it clear that she was still upset.

I chose to look on the bright side, hoping to lift her spirits. "Having Mrs. Warner as a regular customer is good news."

"Of course it's good. But it's not enough. It's never enough!" She threw down her needles and stood, turning her back to me. "Not when Papa doesn't work, and I'm constantly having to spend my time being sure he doesn't hurt himself, or burn the house down, or die by falling into the freezing river." She rested her forehead in her hand.

"It's not his fault."

She rounded on me with fury. "I know that! But it doesn't make it any easier. You get to sit in that farmhouse, safe and content, while—"

"You told me to go!" I said, indignant. "You practically forced me. I didn't choose this, Grace!"

"None of us did!" she yelled. Grace was the one that was always mild, always evenkeeled. Seeing her bent out of shape was disconcerting, but her words were even more so. "But sometimes my envy is so deep, Belle. You get to live a life. A normal life. For the past five years, you've been comfortable and—"

"You mean I got to mourn alone?" I asked, deeply hurt by the implication that I'd somehow gotten the better end of the bargain. "My mother died, and my father sent me away from the only home I'd ever known at fourteen. I wasn't able to communicate with you. I never knew if my family was well. Do you think that was easy for me?" Tears burned my eyes and choked my voice. "Do you think I didn't envy you and Lottie *every day*? You got to stay home. You got to have a father. I didn't. And then, when I *finally* was able to make my way back here, I didn't get my father back. He was already disappearing."

I could tell my words had had an impact, but she shook her head, not ready to give up the argument. "It wasn't easy here, Belle."

"It wasn't easy for me either. You talk about me sitting comfortably in a house for five years, but I spent those five years working my fingers to the bone while you spend the majority of that five years with a sister and a father to help you through it. I had *no one*." I put my hands up to fend off the argument I saw coming. "And I'm not saying I had it worse. I know money has been hard to come by. I know it's been horrible here the past nine months, and I feel guilty every single day because of it. I *know* I'm failing you. I know that, despite everything I do, I will never be enough. But I'm *trying*."

She sank into a chair, her sigh melancholy and tired. "Sometimes I forget how good it was before he got sick." She looked up at me then back down at her hands. "We missed you, you know. All of us did. I think Papa questioned his decision to send you away more often than not. Lottie cried for months. First for Mama, then for you."

I sank to my knees in front of her and took her hands in mine. "But we all got through it. And we'll get through this."

She tipped her head back and pulled in a stuttering breath. When she looked at me, her eyes were shimmering with unshed tears, and my heart ached for her. Then she leaned forward and rested her head on my shoulder, and for the first time in a long time, she felt like my little sister again—the little sister that needed me and trusted me. "Thank you for coming back, Belle."

Her words healed a bit of my broken heart. "Thank you for taking me back."

We each settled into our own endeavors, though there was still a strained undercurrent between us.

Lottie's return made some of that tension ease, but the hollowness I noticed in her cheeks made my gut clench with worry.

When dinner was prepared, I took up a bowl of it and carried it to my father's room.

"I have supper for you," I told him after he bid me enter.

He huffed and got to his feet with a grunt. "I'll eat at the table," he said as he walked carefully toward me.

He listed to the side, but with my hands full, I could not assist him. Luckily, he caught himself. "Are you certain? You usually prefer to eat in—"

"Don't make me repeat myself!" he snapped.

I pinched my mouth shut and backed out of the room, hurrying to set his bowl on the table as I swallowed thickly.

"I am a human being," he said with less severity. "I should be treated as such."

The three of us forced smiles and remained silent through the meal. When his shaking hand caused the soup to fall from his spoon, he threw it back into the bowl and then pounded on the table, making us all flinch.

We did our best to react as little as possible, knowing that trying to talk him down would only make the outburst worse.

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My fight with Grace put a damper on the rest of the day. Charlotte came home and tried to cheer us with her good humor, but the weight of our circumstances was too heavy, and I couldn't manage more than a weak smile for her efforts.

I volunteered to make dinner, desperate to keep busy and feel useful. Grabbing the water pail, I threw a shawl around my shoulders, then walked the short distance to the stream to fill it.

As I hauled it away from the stream and turned toward the cottage, I caught sight of someone coming down the lane. I prepared to give a pleasant greeting, hoping that perhaps it was another customer, ready to buy our wares.

But when he looked up, I lost the grip on the bucket. It thumped to the ground and sloshed freezing water over my feet and the bottom of my skirt.

My whole body screamed for me to hurry inside the house, bar the door, and forget I'd ever seen him, but my feet wouldn't move. I was frozen in fear and apprehension.

Brunson paying a personal visit to my home could only mean misfortune and pain. When he caught sight of my marred expression, a gloating smile curved one side of his mouth, as if my distress brought him immense pleasure.

"Miss Winters," he called out as he approached. "I'm glad I've found you."

I swallowed, my mind a jumbled whirl of whys and what-ifs.

"I have an important matter to discuss with you," he said, stopping a few paces away.

I wanted to ask what he wanted, or be able to say anything at all, but words failed me. His very presence made my insides writhe. I just wanted him to say his piece and be gone.

"Your family is behind on your lease payments, and as such, you shall be evicted from the Calderons' property in one month if you cannot pay in full."

My entire face went numb, and it felt as if all the air was being squeezed from my lungs. We couldn't do it. There was no way we would be able to come up with that much money in one month. At this point, I'd be shocked if we could even come

up with that kind of money in three months. And Nico had assured me that we would be given time.

*Wait.*

The tightness in my chest eased just a little as I narrowed my eyes at Brunson. What was a butler doing here, trying to conduct estate business? I took a careful breath and urged my voice not to wobble as I straightened my shoulders. "You must be mistaken, sir. The estate steward has already been here, and no such notice was given."

His eyes narrowed, and his lip curled. "Perhaps not. But I can assure you, when I report your delinquency to Lady Calderon, she will ensure your eviction."

That might have been true. Maybe he did have that much influence with her ladyship, and maybe she had that much influence with Lord Calderon. But I tried very hard to tell myself it was unlikely. Brunson was just being mean, trying to make me desperate and uncomfortable. I rallied every scrap of courage I had and tilted my chin up. "If that is the case, I'm certain the steward will inform me soon enough."

"Even that fool cannot deny that having a perfectly good forge sitting unused in the possession of a halfwit blacksmith is bad management."

I ignored the piercing pain that sliced at my heart at hearing my father called a halfwit. "Perhaps I could speak to the steward about leasing the forge to someone else, or—"

"It would be impractical and idiotic to break up the forge and the cottage. We need a tenant in this cottage who can do the smithing work that Lord Calderon requires."

"Then I will work that out with the steward," I insisted, because it was the only bit of logic I could hold on to. Brunson interfering made no sense. He was stepping far outside his sphere of influence, and so I clung to the fact that anything official concerning our lease must come through Nico.

Brunson was only trying to intimidate me. I repeated it to myself over and over.

The butler tilted his head in a condescending manner and took a step toward me. "Your naïveté is useless. You know you can't afford to stay here, so why fight against it?" He took another step forward, his eyes taking on a strange softness that was more frightening than his former cold gaze. "Though, I will say, your wide-eyed innocence has its appeal." He reached a hand toward my cheek.

I batted it away. "Don't touch me."

But instead, his hand shot out and wrapped around my upper arm so he could yank me toward him. "Just think about it, Annabelle," he said as a cold hunger filled his eyes. "This isn't your only option. You're a young, vibrant woman. If you married the right sort of man, you'd have no need to worry about money ever again."

The crack of my hand slapping his face shocked even me. My response was instinctual. What he was suggesting was vile and made my stomach churn.

It only took him a moment to recover, though. Then he took hold of my other arm and spoke down at me through clenched teeth. "It didn't have to be this way."

"Get off!" I shouted, trying to pull myself from his grip and kicking out at him. "Let me go!"

"You're nothing," he spat. "You'll be a beggar on the street before I'm done with—"

Thundering hooves and a shout of "Get away from her!" made Brunson stop and look away from me. His distraction allowed me to pull out of his grip, just in time for Nico to swing down from his horse and plant his fist in Brunson's face.



My breath heaved as I looked between Brunson, who was sprawled on the ground, a hand pressed to his nose, and Nico, who stood over him, his fists still clenched.

Nico pointed a threatening finger down at Brunson. "Explain yourself."

"I'll do no such thing," Brunson said, climbing to his feet. "I don't answer to you, Closs," he sneered as blood from his nose seeped between his lips. "And rest assured, I will see you fired for that."

"Me?" Nico said with an incredulous laugh. "I've just witnessed you physically attacking a maid who doesn't even work for you any longer. How long do you suppose it will take me to find others who have similar complaints?" He raised his brow in question, and Brunson looked away. "I don't think Lord Calderon would put up with such things, and believe me, I will be speaking with Lord Calderon about more than just this incident."

"Do what you must, *boy*. I have no regrets." He turned his head and spat blood into the dirt before giving me one more scathing glare and walking away.

Nico turned back to me and put a gentle hand to my cheek. "Are you all right?"

I nodded, even though I felt tears pricking at my eyes.

"Did he hurt you?"

I shook my head. Yes, my arms felt a bit bruised, but I was fine.

"I saw him leave the manor and had a bad feeling about it, but I tried to ignore it. Then I heard one of the maids say that she'd overheard him, and—" He shook his head, cutting himself off. "It doesn't matter." He started to pull back, but I held his hand in place with my own.

"Thank you for coming," I said in a hoarse whisper.

"I'll always come." He pressed a kiss to my forehead. "What did he say to you?"

"That we would be evicted in a month if we did not pay in full."

He pulled back and looked me in the eye. "That is not his decision," he said in a way that left no doubt.

"That's what I told him. But he didn't like that, and he said I should just marry someone for their money."

His eyes narrowed. "Did he have someone in mind for you?"

I lifted one shoulder. "He didn't say, really. But I think...I think..."

His nostrils flared and his jaw clenched. "He was referring to himself?"

I shuddered at the idea. "I don't care if that's what he meant or not. I won't do it. I won't be forced." My voice rose as I thought of Cecily and her narrow escape from the man to whom her uncle had tried to sell her.

Nico pulled me into his arms. "No one is going to force you."

I tightened my arms around him, but he let go of me after only a moment.

"I must go," he said, regret coating his words. "I wish I could stay, but I have to get back to make sure that he doesn't start spreading falsehoods before I have a chance to set the record straight." He looked down at me. "You're cold."

Was I? I supposed I was shaking, but I'd assumed that was just from the emotions raging through me.

Nico stooped and picked up my shawl from where it had fallen during my struggle with Brunson. Then he wrapped it around me. "Go inside."

"I have to get water."

He looked around then spotted the pail. Without a word, he grabbed it, ran back to the stream, filled it up and then returned to my side. He took my hand in his and tugged me along to the cottage, setting the water pail by the door when we arrived. Then he took my hands in his and looked at me one more time. "Everything is

going to be fine,” he promised.

I nodded, not because I believed him but because I loved that he wanted to believe it.

“Go inside and get warm.” Then he jogged to his horse and hurried away.

I took several slow breaths and then let myself in. When my sisters asked me what had taken so long, I showed them my drenched feet and explained that I’d had to go back for more water after spilling the first pail.

I didn’t say anything about Brunson, not only because Nico had told me everything would work out but also because there was nothing more that we could do that we had not already done.

Unless I wanted to consider Brunson’s idea of marrying for money—which I was not willing to do.

If Nico ever did come back in his capacity as steward, telling me we had to move on, then we would have to consider different living arrangements. Perhaps there was a different cottage on the estate that we could lease. One without a forge. One that was smaller. A one-room dwelling for all four of us would not be pleasant, but surely we could make enough to pay for something so modest. Any home was better than no home at all. Surely there were other options. Surely.

GOING BACK TO Springmill after everything that had happened—finding my father wandering, fighting with Grace, being threatened by Brunson—was hard, but I didn't have a choice. I cried most of the way there, finally able to let my emotions show since I didn't have to worry about my sisters asking questions. The tears running down my face made my cheeks extra cold as the wind blew and the sky threatened snow.

Back at Springmill, I tried to immerse myself in winning over Ruby and allowing Arthur to teach me to read, but I still ached. I ached for the time I'd lost with my sisters and especially my father. I ached for the impossible situation we found ourselves in, but I tried to push it aside, knowing there was nothing but to do my job well and earn the money we needed.

My job certainly wasn't drudgery. There were plenty of bright moments with the children, and those moments were sprinkled in with all the tedium and frustration of trying to get four children to mind me.

At the moment, Arthur was sitting beside me at the child-size table situated in the nursery, prompting me to sound out more words. With his help, I'd become good enough that I could sound out nearly all the words in the most simple books. When he was bored of tutoring me, Violet jumped up from where she and Ruby had been playing with wooden ponies. "It's my turn!" she insisted and pulled me to an overstuffed chair, practically shoving me onto it.

"All right, then, climb up," I invited.

She nestled into the crook of my arm, and I slowly read her the little rhyming book about Dog and Hog, who liked to sit on logs and such. "Dog and Hog go to vi...vis—"

"Visit!" she chimed in. Violet was always thrilled when I needed help, but she also loved that someone was reading to her more often. Reading had been one of their dearest pastimes with their mother, and they all missed it.

"Yes, thank you, dear. Dog and Hog go to visit Frog."

As I continued to read, Ruby edged closer. She'd warmed up enough that she sometimes let me sit beside her so long as I didn't look at her. Her stubbornness was both impressive and frustrating.

Once the book was finished, I put together a puzzle with all three of them while constantly checking the time.

It was late November, and Mr. Lockwood had arranged for us all to go to the winter festival that afternoon. I remembered the festival from when I was young, before I'd been sent away, and I was anxious to reclaim a bit of the magic I could remember.

The clock seemed to be moving more slowly than usual, but when it was finally half past one, I encouraged the children to clean up. "Bernard will be awake soon, so we must get ready to attend the festival!"

"Oh yeah," Arthur said, as if he'd already forgotten.

It seemed I was the one who was most excited for the outing. Still, they all cooperated, and we were nearly ready by the time I heard Bernard fussing from the other room. I was about to go fetch him, but before I could, Mr. Lockwood showed

up in the nursery with Bernard already tucked into his shoulder.

He was a good father, a good man. I was lucky to be in his employ.

We all bundled into the wagon. Arthur sat up front with his father, and I did my best to entertain Ruby and Violet while Bernard wiggled in my arms. The baby had become less cuddly over the last month, which was both a blessing and a curse. I missed his constant unconditional love, but it did allow me to get more done.

“Look!” I said to the girls. “The snow fairies spread their magic last night.”

The girls sat up straighter so they could admire the trees and fields that were covered in a dusting of snow from a storm that had come through overnight. When we reached the edge of the village, we left the wagon among a row of other wagons and hopped down, making sure that everyone had their hats and mittens.

Mr. Lockwood carried Ruby at her insistence, and Arthur stayed at his side, ever the serious young master.

“Violet, will you hold on to my skirt here?” I asked, motioning to the folds of fabric at my hip.

“Yep,” she said and fisted her hand in my skirt.

“Very good.” I hitched Bernard higher on my hip. “Now I won’t lose you.”

“Are we ready?” Mr. Lockwood asked.

I nodded.

“Off we go, then.”

We walked down the narrow cobbled lanes, and by the time we reached the large village square, my grin was firmly plastered to my face. All the sights and sounds of happy people, revelry, and glittering snow-covered roofs lightened my heart. The smell of roasted meats and spiced wine filled the air. Two fiddlers played together close by, their pace frantic and their smiles wide. A stage was set up for theatrical performances, and I even saw a juggler off in the distance. A few industrious children were rolling snowballs and trying to make snow forts in the shade against the buildings that ringed the square, though there was only an inch of powdery white, and it would likely melt in the next couple hours.

Mr. Lockwood led the way into the crowds, and we spent the next hour meandering among the other villagers, stopping to watch the acrobats and buy some treats.

Bernard fell asleep on my shoulder, and when Arthur asked to go find the jugglers, Mr. Lockwood looked to me with a question in his gaze.

“I’ll find a place to sit and wait here if you don’t mind.”

“That sounds fine,” he said with an understanding smile. “Violet, do you want to see the acrobats?” he asked, offering a hand to his older daughter.

She looked from him to me and then tucked herself into my side. “I’ll stay.”

Mr. Lockwood seemed surprised but pleased and hefted Ruby higher in his arms. “Very well. We’ll be back soon.”

They set out, and I turned in a circle, looking for a spot where I could sit down. My arm was nearly numb from holding Bernard’s sleeping weight.

I hadn’t seen my sisters yet, but I knew they would be here, selling socks, scarves, mittens, and hats. It was the only time they made and sold anything other than socks, and it was the best time for it.

“Annabelle!”

I turned at the sound of my name, surprised to see Nico walking toward me, bundled against the chill but looking happy. My mind went immediately to the kiss we’d shared on the side of the road, and my neck turned suddenly hot. There was also a heat in Nico’s gaze that made me think he was remembering just like I was.

"Uncle Nico!" Violet called out, pulling me from my reverie. She dropped my hand and went running for him.

*Wait... Uncle?* I watched in astonishment as Violet leapt into Nico's arms.

"Hello, angel," he said as she hugged him around the neck. "Are you having fun with Annabelle?"

Violet nodded and laid her head on Nico's shoulder as though she'd done it a hundred times before, which she probably had because, apparently, she was his niece.

And if she was his niece, that meant...that Mr. Lockwood was Nico's *brother*.

I...didn't know what to think of that.

He turned his smile on me and must have noted my shock and confusion, because his smile immediately fell, replaced by chagrin or guilt or something else.

He walked over to me, his expression settling into sheepish territory. "Good day, Annabelle."

"Good day?" I didn't mean for it to be a question, but I just had *so* many questions. Mr. Lockwood's last name was Lockwood. Nico's was Closs. Mr. Lockwood was at least ten, perhaps even fifteen years older than Nico. Wait. Mr. Lockwood must be his brother-in-law. That would make more sense since they didn't have the same last name. Had Mr. Lockwood's wife been Nico's sister?

"Are you enjoying the festival?" he asked.

Were we going to ignore the fact that I'd just found out he was related to my employer? "I—yes, it's been very enjoyable."

"Brunson hasn't bothered you again, has he?"

My heart sank. "No, but I've been at Springmill. If he comes back to my home, then my sisters will have to deal with him." My anxiety swelled. "I thought you were going to speak with Lord Calderon."

"I was, but the very next day, the Calderons left to visit the sea. So instead, I've been making inquiries, paying close attention, and gathering witness statements. But it's hard to feel like it will be enough. The Calderons returned a week ago, but I haven't brought it to his lordship's attention yet." His furrowed brow told me how frustrated he was by it all. "I want to be sure that I have enough evidence so that when I bring it to Lord Calderon, he will have no choice but to sack him, regardless of what his wife thinks."

"That's a tall order."

"It is, but it needs to be done. I can't countenance allowing his abuses to go unchecked. I only wish I could be more hasty about it."

"But you'll only have one chance," I said, understanding his predicament.

"Precisely."

"I've been worried about Mara and the others. I'm grateful they have you looking out for them."

"It's the least I can do."

Bernard jolted awake, and I adjusted him on my hip, but he only squirmed more, and when he squawked, I realized he was reaching out for Nico, wanting to be held by his uncle as well.

"I'll take him," Nico said, reaching out. "I'm certain your arms could use a rest."

"I—" Before I could even think about the best way to hand the baby over to a man who was already holding a four-year-old, Nico had lifted Bernard with one large hand and nestled him into his shoulder, bestowing a kiss on the top of the baby's head.

Saints above, if that wasn't attractive, I didn't know what was.

I propped my hands on my hips and frowned up at him, confused. "You never said you were related to Mr. Lockwood."

He had the audacity to shrug. "It wasn't pertinent," he said while Bernard tried to stick his hand into Nico's mouth.

"Not pertinent? But—"

"Ladies and gentlemen!" a large, jolly-looking man called from where the temporary stage had been erected. "In just a quarter of an hour, our pantomime will begin, so get yourself some food and find a seat. The play is on!" He swept into a dramatic bow and then left the stage.

"That's my cue," Nico said as he let Violet slide to the ground then looked up at me, excitement in his eyes. "You'll watch, won't you?" he asked as he handed Bernard back to me.

I looked from him to the stage to the baby in my arms. "You mean you're in it?"

He grinned and tipped his hat. "I am, indeed. And it's time for me to get ready." He crouched down to speak with Violet. "Are you going to watch me in my pantomime?"

She eagerly nodded.

"Good. Help Annabelle find some good seats, and be sure to boo and cheer as loud as you can, all right?"

"I will!" she said, bouncing on her toes.

He winked at me and was off, leaving me with my mouth agape. Did Nico have theatrical aspirations? He was so very orderly and organized that I hadn't considered he might be a secret creative, but then again, he was also quite a tease. It was the thing about him that put me at ease. He could always lighten the mood.

It took Violet tugging on my hand to shake me out of my stupor, and we went to claim a section of bench near the stage.

Bernard decided to fall back to sleep, but this time I was able to lay him on the bench beside me, using my scarf as extra padding underneath and around him. Then I stretched my arms and back and settled in to wait for the pantomime to start.

As Violet prattled at my side, I was able to sit back and enjoy the hustle and laughter of the festival. People stood in little groupings, their hands wrapped around steaming mugs of mulled wine or wassail. Children tipped their heads back to stare up at the acrobats, stilt-walkers, and jugglers. It all reminded me vividly of the times I'd attended this festival with my family, holding my mother's hand as my father herded my younger sisters. I closed my eyes as love and loss washed over me, the taste bittersweet on my tongue.

The man who had first called the crowd to gather stepped up on stage once again, introduced the play, and then stepped aside. Shockingly, it was Nico himself who was the first to step on stage. He was wearing a long forest-green cloak and a wreath of ivy sitting in his curly hair. He swept dramatically around the stage, sometimes with his cloak hiding his lower face. He was very animated, and I truly enjoyed watching him. His character was a pickpocket, but as he was busy thieving, he came across a maiden in distress and ended up saving her from the dastardly villain. Her gratitude was so great that it changed him, and he became the hero in the end. Violet was very good at cheering when there was reason to rejoice, but she was even better at yelling long, drawn-out boos when the villain came around stealing and cheating others. Whenever Nico went to do something sneaky, he would pause, turn to the audience, lift one eyebrow dramatically, and then sweep up his cloak as he crept across the stage. His prancing sneakery made me laugh every time.

Bernard stayed asleep throughout the entire thing, as if the loud din was just what he needed for a deep sleep. Babies were a mystery.

At one point, I looked around to see if Mr. Lockwood was looking for us, and instead, I saw my sisters. They were working their way through the crowd, selling their knitted wares. I managed to catch Lottie's eye, and she gave me a big wave, but Grace seemed distracted by a young man who was following close beside her. From the looks of it, she didn't mind his presence one bit. I'd have to ask her about him later.

Turning back to the pantomime, I found Nico looking at me, and he gave a wink before putting on an expression of confusion and rubbing his chin. I flushed in response to the flirtatious gesture.

When the pantomime ended, everyone got up to clap and holler, which finally woke Bernard and sent him into an indignant squall. I gathered him up, and he quieted a little, but I had to wait for the applause to stop and the audience to clear out before I could leave. It was a relief to see Nico standing at the edge of the crowd, the ivy wreath gone but the cloak still around his shoulders.

He immediately reached for Bernard. "What's wrong, young squire?"

"I think he's hungry," I answered.

"Ah." Nico looked down at Violet. "Should we go find your papa?"

Violet nodded. "You were so silly, Uncle Nico."

"Was I?" he asked with eyebrows raised in feigned astonishment.

"Very."

"Well, good." He turned to lead the way through the crowd. There were six bonfires being set up around the square. "My brother always helps with the fires," he explained without me having to ask.

My brow furrowed. So they were brothers after all. Interesting.

He and I walked side by side, him holding Bernard in his right arm, me holding Violet's hand in my left. I was achingly aware of the way my hand swung so close to his, wondering if it might brush against his and nervous about the heat I felt waiting there.

Conversation. That's what we needed. "I can't believe you didn't tell me that Mr. Lockwood was your brother," I said, because really I could hardly let that bit of information pass without acknowledging it.

"It never came up," he said with a nonchalance that irked me.

"But *how* can he be your brother?"

"We have the same mother, that's how. Oof!" he said as I poked my elbow into his side. Then he looked down at me and laughed. "We are half-brothers. He's my mother's only child from her first marriage. My four sisters and I came along much later and with a different father."

"I suppose that makes sense." Though, it still didn't explain why he hadn't mentioned it before.

He snorted a laugh. "You suppose, do you?"

"It's just difficult to wrap my mind around it. I've been around the man every day for the past month, and not once did I consider that the two of you were related."

"We each take after our fathers in looks, so there's little family resemblance."

"You made it sound like you only had sisters," I threw at him.

"No, I just said that I grew up surrounded by four sisters, which is absolutely true. Alexander was only there when I was young."

We found Arthur and Ruby sitting on a thick wool blanket spread over the cobbles, munching on roasted nuts as they watched Mr. Lockwood building up a

bonfire. We joined them, and Arthur handed over a soft roll that I was able to feed to Bernard in small pinches.

When the fire closest to us was roaring, Mr. Lockwood came over and collapsed on the blanket by his children. I looked at the two brothers, trying to see any resemblance and failing.

“Is it time to dance?” Violet asked, tilting her head back to look up at her father.

He grinned down at her. “Very nearly. As soon as the music starts.”

Violet got to her feet and came over to wrap her arms around my neck. “You’ll dance with me, won’t you, Annabelle?”

“Of course,” I said, thrilled to be the chosen one.

When the musicians struck up their tunes, Violet took no time at all pulling me into the fray of dancers. We happily linked hands with others and skipped along, the long line of people weaving around the fires like a serpent. Then I took both of Violet’s hands so we could spin and twirl. Having her dance with such abandon allowed me to do the same. It had been a long time since I’d felt such sparkling, carefree joy, and when Arthur joined us, I was even happier. The little gentleman took up his position beside me, took my right hand in his, and then reached up to loop his left arm around my lower back so that he could promenade us around the fire while Violet skipped along beside us. Then he did the same for his sister.

I was shocked when Ruby showed up to join her siblings, but Mr. Lockwood followed right after, surprising me by scooping up Violet and dancing about with her in his arms, her legs dangling and her head thrown back in laughter.

I looked to the blanket we’d vacated and found Nico with Bernard resting against his shoulder, his eyes on me.

The fire and the exertion made me flush hot as Nico continued to look on with a smile curving one side of his mouth and the flames reflecting in his eyes. He still wore the green cloak and used it as a blanket for Bernard. I was tempted to just keep staring, fascinated by the heat sparking in his gaze, but I looked away and danced about with Arthur and Ruby. Yet, only a few moments later, my eyes were straying back to Nico.

Nico, who three weeks ago had kissed me and left me forever changed. Nico, who I’d thought could not look more handsome, but who now sat in the glow of the fire with a baby in his arms, leaving me nearly breathless.

As we danced, the snow started, drifting down in beautiful fluffy flakes, disappearing when they hit the heat of the fires. The festival would have to come to a close now, as everyone would need to get indoors before we all got wet and cold. But for a moment, I tipped my head back and looked up at the black sky, watching as the flakes sparkled like stars as they fell down on us all. At least in this moment, I was content.



NOVEMBER TURNED OUT well. It had been my first full month in my new position, and I was grateful and satisfied with my work.

It was December first, and as the wagon rumbled along beneath me, I wondered again why Mr. Lockwood had insisted on driving me home today. I had walked home on my last day off and would have been happy to do so again. He paid me a fair wage and was a good employer, so I certainly didn't expect him to cart me about, but he had insisted.

When we arrived, he even jumped down and assisted me in getting down. "Thank you," I said, pulling my hand from his after he had held on to it for what felt like an overly long time. "I will return this evening." I dipped my head and stepped away.

"Miss Winters?"

I turned back to him. "Yes, sir?"

"I was hoping to speak to your father."

My brow shot up. What an odd request. "Oh. I don't know if he is up for visitors. He rarely feels well." I had never explained my father's illness to Mr. Lockwood.

He smiled softly, but when he spoke, it was with authority. "I understand that, but it's important."

I swallowed and nodded. I couldn't really deny the request. "Very well." I turned again, this time leading him toward the cottage. I opened the door, and my sisters looked up. Charlotte opened her mouth, but I gave a quick shake of my head and kept the door wide so that Mr. Lockwood could follow me inside.

He removed his flat cap and smiled. My sisters looked on, shocked.

"Mr. Lockwood, these are my sisters," I said, hoping they would snap out of it. "This is Grace."

Grace stood abruptly and dipped a curtsy, her hands tightly gripping the sock and ball of yarn in her hands.

"And Charlotte." I gestured to Charlotte, who was already standing, and who wasn't hiding her curiosity at all. "Mr. Lockwood would like to speak with Papa. Grace, could you—"

She was moving before I finished my question. "I'll see that he's ready for a visitor," she said as she scurried to my father's room. Hopefully, that meant that Papa was having a good morning.

"Can I get you some...tea?" I asked out of politeness, cutting my eyes over to Charlotte, hoping that if he said yes, we actually would have some tea to offer, though the more I thought about it, the more unlikely that seemed.

Charlotte shook her head, a startled look on her face. I winced.

"No, thank you," Mr. Lockwood said. "I've come unannounced and have no desire to upset your routines." He crossed to the fireplace, which held a very small fire, only big enough to keep the worst of the chill at bay. On the mantel, we displayed the different sorts of socks we could make, hanging from a length of twine that was strung in front of it. "I heard you sisters do excellent work."

Charlotte blushed at the compliment and tried not to grin, but it slipped through anyway. "We try, sir."

Mr. Lockwood was kind enough to keep his attention on the socks, admiring beyond what was reasonable, but his feigned interest meant that I did not feel the need to fill the silence.

Eventually, the door to my father's room opened, and Grace stepped out. "He's ready for you, Mr. Lockwood. I'm afraid he can't stand well, so please excuse him for not greeting you properly."

"Of course. There is no need to stand on ceremony. Thank you," he said, giving a slight bow to Grace as he passed her and entered my father's room, shutting the door behind him.

Grace and Charlotte both scurried over to me and started speaking in frantic whispers.

"What is he doing here?" Grace asked.

"Why does he want to speak with Papa?" Lottie talked over her.

"Does he know how sick Papa is?"

I just shook my head through it all. "I don't know. I cannot imagine why he would need to speak with Papa."

"You haven't done anything wrong, have you?" Grace asked.

"I don't think so." Though, now I was worried.

"Belle, what if he fires you?" Grace's eyes were wide and terrified. "With your wages and our extra earnings from the winter festival, we'll be able to pay the lease on the fifteenth, but if you lose your job..."

We wouldn't be able to pay in January without my earnings. I shook my head, determined not to panic for no reason. "I don't think he's going to fire me. I've done nothing wrong. The children like me. It will be fine," I said with finality.

Grace nodded, but as we all settled down and continued our knitting, she still looked extra worried. I was fairly certain Mr. Lockwood's visit was not a reflection of any mistake or misstep on my part. There was no reason for him to address anyone but me if he had a problem with my work. So then, was it a social call? Was he curious about my family? I didn't know, and each reason that I came up with seemed even more farfetched than the last, so I banished all speculation from my mind and focused intently on getting my stitches even.

The door startled me when it opened. Mr. Lockwood came out, a faint smile on his mouth as he caught my eye and bent his head, saying, "Thank you, Miss Winters," before putting his hat on and letting himself out the front door.

"Well," my father said as he braced himself with both hands in the doorway. His eyes were fixed in my general direction, but he obviously could not see me clearly. "I have some wonderful news for you girls." He was making an effort to smile and be pleasant, which I was grateful for, but it also made me starkly aware of just how different he was from the easy-going, reliable father who had raised me.

"What news, Papa?" I asked.

He continued to brace himself with one hand and reached the other in my direction. "Come here, Belle."

I carefully set my knitting aside and went to take his hand. It was softer than it should have been. He'd lost many of the layers of calluses that had adorned his palms from so many years of laboring with his hands. "What is it, Papa?" I asked, smiling up at him and hoping that he was close enough to see it.

He put a hand to my cheek and grinned as he said, "You, my dear, are to be married."

My chin jerked back, and my eyelids fluttered in confusion. “What are you talking about?” Surely this was his sickness talking.

“Mr. Lockwood is looking for a wife, and because you are such a responsible, kind-hearted soul, he has chosen you.” There was an odd, dreamy quality to his eyes that made me believe he was not thinking clearly.

I took his hand from my cheek and held it in both of my own, hoping that it would ground him in reality. “I don’t understand,” I said, trying to keep my voice gentle.

He stepped back, the dreamy look slipping from his face. “What is there to understand? Mr. Lockwood came here to speak with me and ask for your hand in marriage. I gave it, naturally.”

My gut clenched. An agreement between a father and a suitor was not binding, but going against it would reflect poorly on me. I’d be considered an ungrateful tease. Still, I had to be honest. “But Papa, I do not wish to marry Mr. Lockwood.”

“Why?” He looked genuinely befuddled.

“I do not care for him in that way”—though I did care for his *brother* in that way—“and he still mourns his wife, so I know he could not love me.”

“Marriage is based on more than fickle feelings,” he said shortly.

It hurt to hear him say such things, especially when I knew how much he had adored my mother. I shook my head. “I don’t want this, Papa.” Being married off to Nico’s brother sounded torturous. “Please don’t make me.”

He grabbed my arm and pulled me close. “Don’t be selfish,” he hissed in my ear. “Think of your sisters. Not only is this man willing to take you on as a wife, but he’s agreed to help your sisters.”

“My position is already helping them,” I argued, desperate to find firm footing in this situation.

“And how much longer do you think you’ll have that position? Mr. Lockwood wants a wife, and once he has one, he’ll have no need of you.”

My heart sank. Was that true?

“What would happen to the three of you without the extra income? My mind might be crumbling, but I’m not daft enough to think any of you would have suitable prospects or a comfortable life once I am gone.” His hand squeezed my arm, and I sucked a breath through my teeth. “You will do this,” he insisted.

I didn’t know which father was speaking to me. Was this the father I remembered, who was simply desperate to see his daughters cared for before he died? Or was this the part of his sickness that made him mean, spiteful, and controlling?

And in the end, did it matter?

His grip on my arm eased. “Now, Mr. Lockwood is waiting outside to speak with you. He is a true gentleman and wanted to discuss the arrangement with you himself.” He kept one hand on the wall to hold himself steady as he guided me toward the door and practically shoved me through it. I turned back to protest further, but he shut the door in my face.

I stood there for several harried breaths, staring at the door that was only a hand’s breadth from my nose. When I turned around, I would have to face Mr. Lockwood—my employer—who had apparently just asked for permission to *marry me*.

Hot and cold ran over my skin, but my discomfort did not change my circumstances. So I forced a deep breath, clasped my hands together, and turned.

Mr. Lockwood stood beside his wagon, his hands in his pockets and a mild smile on his face.

I walked toward him, one foot in front of the other, like a soldier to a battlefield. I stopped a few paces away, my eyes fixed on his face as I waited for him to say something.

"I'm sorry about your father's illness" were his first words.

I blinked in surprise. "Thank you. It keeps getting worse and worse, faster and faster." Should I tell him my father was on the verge of being mad? Would that convince him it was not wise to marry me? Could I afford not to marry him? Could my sisters?

All my life, I had never had trouble giving of myself to help others. So then why couldn't I do this? Why did this feel like I was being asked to rip out my own heart and burn it on a pyre?

I, at least, deserved some answers. "Why me?"

"You are lovely, young, kind, and engaging."

Did that mean he had feelings for me? If so, he had given no indication.

"And you are not in love with me," he added abruptly.

"No, I am not," I assured him, hoping that might be a point against me.

He nodded. "I could not marry someone who loved me when I know I can't return the feeling."

My heart dropped. "So I am a safe option?"

"Yes."

I was tempted to make a snarky remark about how flattering that assessment was, but I was too practical. I might not agree with how he was going about getting a wife, but I understood it. "Might I be honest?"

"I wish you would."

"I do not wish to marry you." My voice broke on the last word. Standing up for myself, refusing to sacrifice myself, was foreign to me.

His eyes were kind despite my declaration. "I understand that. I did not expect that you would be giddy and jump at the opportunity. But I also believe you are practical enough to consider it before you reject me outright."

He was wrong; I didn't want to consider it. But he was right too.

"I know you care for my children," he said.

"Of course I do." That was not a question.

"So it would not be so hard to love them and be a mother to them, would it?"

I shook my head. "That's not a worry. It's not them I would be married to."

"And we could have children of our own."

His words should have been a comfort. I had always wanted to be a mother, to bear my own children. Yet the idea of bearing this man's children...everything inside me recoiled at the thought. I shook my head but couldn't find the words to explain.

"Of course," he started carefully, "if you do not wish to have children of our own, I won't force it."

There should have been reassurance in knowing that he would be as fair and respectful in a marriage as he was in our working relationship. And yet I couldn't imagine being well and truly married to him. The picture wouldn't form in my mind. We didn't know each other well enough, though as I thought on it, I wondered if that's how he preferred it. Was this strictly a business transaction? Did he mostly want a mother for his children and little else? While I had come to care for his children, there was still a separateness in our relationship. I was a servant, and so I kept myself apart. As their mother, I would learn to offer them a mother's love.

Would that be so terrible? There were certainly worse things than being taken care of by a gentleman farmer while I raised his children, but was I ready to settle for a life of only that?

“Will you consider it?”

Bitterness soaked my tongue. “My father has already said yes for me.”

His gaze softened. “Perhaps, but I am only concerned with your answer.”

I swallowed, wishing I could swallow the words I was bound to say, but they came anyway. “I will consider it.”

He smiled in his sad way that I was so familiar with. “Thank you, Annabelle. You’re a remarkable person, and if I can give you some relief from your troubles, I’d consider it an honor.” He looked to the cottage then back at me. “I can see how much you care for your sisters, and if you do decide to marry me, they’d always be welcome in our home.”

I felt the color drain from my face as the weight of what he wasn’t saying hit me full force. My father was dying, and when that happened, all three of us would need a place to go.

His smile was kind and commiserating, as if he knew my thoughts. “I hope you enjoy your day with your family.”

I nearly scoffed but managed to hold it in. There would be nothing enjoyable about this day. Still, I forced a “Thank you.”

“In fact,” he continued, “you should take an extra day. Stay with them tomorrow as well. I have no wish to rush your decision.”

I wanted to resent Mr. Lockwood for the position he was putting me in, but he did it in such a thoughtful way that it was difficult. I dipped into a curtsy. “Good day, Mr. Lockwood.”

He touched the brim of his hat and climbed onto his wagon. “I will see you in two days.”

NICO HAD TOLD us that he would buy socks from us when he was in need, but it was still strange to have him show up at our door, especially since it was December first and I was home. My heart leapt at the thought that he'd done it on purpose because he wanted to see me and knew I would be home. Then I realized it didn't matter. I couldn't think that it mattered. I was practically engaged to Mr. Lockwood, because without the money and support he could provide, we would never be able to continue making the lease payments.

When the knock sounded on the door, Charlotte was the one to open it. I focused on the scarf I was knitting until she called out, "Annabelle! Mr. Closs is here to see you."

My knitting needles froze.

Nico stepped in, closing the door behind him to shut out the chill, and his gaze found me where I sat by the fire.

I smiled at him—or I tried to. "Nicolai." I couldn't call him Nico, not now. I got slowly to my feet, ignoring my knitting when it fell to the ground. I took several steps toward him but stopped when there was still plenty of distance between us. I couldn't get close. Not when I was very nearly engaged. *To his brother.* Oh, stars above, was that why he was here? To congratulate me? Did he know? "What are you doing here?"

"I..." He still stood by the door. "I am in need of socks." The statement came out like more of a question. He was probably confused by my lack of reception. I had kissed this man a month ago on my last day off, and then admired him all during the winter festival, and it hurt every piece of my heart to know that nothing like that would ever happen to me again because I would say yes to marrying Mr. Lockwood. Alexander. His brother. *Oh, stars.*

I knew that marrying Mr. Lockwood was what I had to do, but with Nico standing before me, the consequences of that necessity settled over me like thorns against my skin. I couldn't reject Mr. Lockwood based only on an infatuation that might never be fully reciprocated. It was too much to hope that Nico would want to marry me too or that he would interfere in his brother's life in that way. Thus, my marriage would be loveless. I would never feel cherished or adored. I would never have the chance at building a life as a true partner to someone.

But I would be safe, and my sisters would at least have a safe place to come if—when—my father died.

As I studied the kindness in Nico's handsome face, it was clear by his expression that he knew nothing of his brother's proposal. He was here for socks. I would focus on that. "Yes. Come in." I waved him inside, trying to be polite and professional while my insides shriveled and writhed.

He stepped forward, removed his hat, and came over to the fireplace where a variety of socks hung.

Swallowing hard, I forced myself to say the things I said to every other customer who came here seeking warmth for their feet. "These are the different colors, sizes, and styles that we have. If you can tell me what you'd like."

I made the mistake of looking at him and caught him blinking in confusion. But then he nodded and pointed to a couple without much thought.

I picked up the basket that was filled with bundles of socks. Each bundle was tied in twine, and they were grouped in sizes. I dug until I found the socks he had indicated and untied the twine. "How many would you like?" I asked, keeping my focus on the socks. The more I looked at him, the harder it would be.

"Three pairs would do well for me," he said, and I had to wonder if he was trying to throw more money at us, like he had with the coins. But my pride was broken enough that I didn't care.

I told him the price, and he quickly handed it over. I mechanically put the coins away, hoping he would just go so that I could stop wanting him to stay.

He didn't leave. He lingered, and after several uncomfortable moments, he said, "Annabelle?"

I nearly winced at the way he caressed my name, and when I looked up, I immediately regretted it. His gaze was so intense, so open, like he was begging for me to say something, needing to hear some explanation of why I was acting the way I was.

"Might I speak with you outside?" he pleaded when I didn't say anything.

My eyes darted to my sisters then to the door to Papa's room, wondering what he would think of me speaking privately with Nico when I was expected to marry Alexander. But I couldn't bring myself to say no. "I suppose."

My unenthusiastic response made his brow slam down in alarm, and I had to pull my gaze from his.

I wiped my hands on my apron, even though they weren't wet or dirty, but it was better than wringing my hands and showing my agitation. I wrapped a shawl around my shoulders, crossed to the door, and walked out, bracing myself against the cold and whatever was going to come next.

The sunlight felt too bright and the stream too loud. My footsteps made the frost crunch beneath my feet. I jumped at the sound of the door shutting behind me, and I wanted to cry when Nico said, "Annabelle?"

I turned to face him, my shawl wrapped tightly around my torso and my shoulders hunched as I tried to hold myself together. "Yes, Mr. Closs?"

I'd hoped using his formal name would put some much-needed distance between us. Instead, it just made him look sad. "You usually call me by my given name. Did I do something wrong?"

"No. Of course not," I assured him. This man. This wonderful, good man was the last person I ever wanted to hurt.

"Then what—"

"I'm engaged," I blurted. Because there was nothing else to say. Those two words were all that mattered. They were the truth, and the implication of them changed anything and everything that could or might or would have happened between us.

His expression froze.

"Or at least I will be, when I accept," I said, pulling my shawl tighter, trying to fight against the cold that seemed to seep deep into my bones.

"I—" No other words followed. He just stared in shock.

"And I *must* accept," I explained, "because my father agreed to it, and if I don't, I will be without a husband and without a job, and then there will not be enough. Not enough work means not enough food, and not enough money, and being thrown out of this house and—"

“Annabelle,” he interrupted my rambling, his expression strained. “Please. Start at the beginning.”

I swallowed hard, trying not to cry. “Mr. Lockwood—” I shut my eyes as the unfairness of this situation washed over me anew. “Your brother wants a wife. He asked me, and if I say no, he will find someone else, and he will not need my services anymore.”

Several intense emotions seemed to work their way across his face, but I couldn’t identify any of them. But then he took a measured breath and asked, “Alexander proposed marriage to you?”

I just nodded, hating the words, hating that they were true.

He dragged a hand down his face. “When did this happen?”

I dropped my gaze. “This morning.” My voice was quiet and gravelly. “He came to speak to my father, then to me.”

He studied my face for several heavy moments, his gaze intense. “You do not look thrilled by the prospect,” he commented.

His simple observation broke me, and when I looked up at him, I was sure that all my pain and regret showed clearly. I wanted to beg for relief, but I couldn’t. “I’m grateful he thinks I am useful. But I would rather not be married for my usefulness.” My voice trembled, and I had to pinch my lips together.

His jaw worked, and his eyes darted about as though he could not make sense of any of it. “But you are going to agree to it anyway?”

A sharp pain sliced my side as I realized I’d been secretly wishing that Nico would have a solution. But he offered no alternative. So I nodded. “My father gave his word, and even if he hadn’t...if Alexander marries someone else, then I won’t have a job. And I don’t have the skills that my sisters do. I try, but I can’t contribute enough.” Anger and bitterness leaked out with my words. “My father can’t work, and we don’t sell enough socks to keep the cottage.”

“You don’t have to do this,” he said. “There are other options.”

My heart leapt with hope, and I waited for him to suggest one. In my heart of hearts, I wanted him to insist that he would never allow me to marry Alexander because he wanted me for *himself*. I waited, desperate for him to offer that glimmer of hope, for him to confess that what I felt for him wasn’t one-sided. But I waited in vain. Despite his assertion, he offered no other course of action.

So I smiled with my lips and dug for the stoicism that had sustained me for so many years. “I’d rather not, but I don’t have much choice, do I? My father may be half out of his mind, but he’s still my father. He has agreed.” A tear slid down my face. “And I’m an obedient daughter.” The hollow ring of my words was a little frightening, but the truth of the matter felt as though a noose were tightening around my neck, threatening to drain the life from my limbs.

His jaw was clenched so tightly that it quivered, and his usually steady gaze flashed with anger as he hissed, “I can’t believe he would do this.” He paced in agitation.

I wanted to ask to what he referred, but I was too hurt and confused and mixed up, and he continued before I found the words.

“When I told him to hire you, I never thought he would be fool enough to—”

“When you *what*?”

He stopped pacing, his eyes darting to my face. “Nothing.”

“Not nothing. You told him to hire me?” I shut my eyes, humiliated as everything fell into place. “Of course you did. You probably begged him to hire me. Of course it was not simple good fortune. It was you and your meddling.”

“Meddling?” He stared at me in affront. “I was trying to take care of you.”



*Take care of me.* Like I was a wounded bird he needed to fuss over before setting me free and then patting himself on the back for his charitable generosity. “Then why hide it?” I knew it was not actually his help that angered me. It was the fact that I wanted so much more from him. “If there was nothing insulting about you begging your brother to take me on, then why—”

“Because you are stubborn, and maddeningly independent, and always hesitant to accept help,” he said with an accusatory glare. “And after I saw you struggling here in the dirt,” he said, jabbing a finger at the now-frozen garden bed, “too thin, downcast, starving, and about to be evicted, I had to do *something*, and I wasn’t about to let your pride get in the way.”

Washed in hurt and humiliation, my breathing came in short bursts, puffing into the cold air in little clouds. He *had* to help. He’d felt honor-bound to help. And instead of offering me a home and a place in his heart, he’d foisted me onto his brother. I forced a swallow and took a steadying breath, pulling all my good sense and pragmatism around me. “Well. It’s a good thing you did,” I admitted. “It’s provided for myself and my sisters, and after I marry Mr. Lock—Alexander—”

He flinched.

“I will be safely settled, and you need not worry about me any longer.” I tried to infuse my words with as much kindness as possible. He had done a good thing. I could admit as much. Just because I wanted so much *more* from him didn’t mean that he’d done anything *wrong*.

His face softened, once again infused with compassion. “I only wanted to help. I still want to help. If this isn’t what you want—”

I shook my head and took a step back. Clearly, he’d been content to kiss me but didn’t want anything more. And for that, I couldn’t blame him. A kiss and a wedding were very different things, especially when I was so far below him. The fact that his brother was willing to marry me only made sense because he didn’t truly need a wife. Alexander had had that already. He only needed a mother for his children. “You’ve helped enough. I’ll be forever grateful.” The words choked me as I said them. “But I won’t pull you into my troubles any longer. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have things to attend to.”

I fled so he wouldn’t see my tears. I walked away without a goodbye, and he let me. He didn’t call out or try to stop me. And the tears were pouring down my face before I even reached the door.

Hope, which had flared so brightly inside me, now tasted like ash on my tongue. It was a dangerous thing, hope. There was so much more at stake when one started to hope, and the pain of losing those what-ifs and those might-have-beens left me wretched. Yet I had no one to blame but myself. Nicolai hadn’t taken anything from me. He’d broken no promise. I’d only been foolish enough to hope for more than I had any right to.

I LAY DOWN on the thin pallet beside the cottage fireplace, but I knew sleep would be a long time coming. Part of me wished that Mr. Lockwood hadn't given me the extra day. If my fate was already decided, what was the purpose of pretending otherwise? Was there any virtue in imagining that I had a choice in the matter? Even as I'd said the words to Mr. Lockwood, even as I'd told him that I didn't love him and had no wish to marry him, we both knew I would do it anyway.

Young, destitute girls did not turn down perfectly respectable marriage proposals. Such a refusal would be the height of idiocy and ingratitude.

I distracted myself from the pit in my stomach by thinking about Nico. I let myself indulge in the fantasy of what my life could have been like if he'd thought I was someone he wanted to marry. Would he have kissed me the way he did a month ago, or were such tender moments only reserved for first kisses and fledgling love? If he had wished to marry me, would he have taken the time to finish teaching me how to read? I had learned a lot from Arthur, but I still needed more practice.

It was a lovely fantasy, and one I indulged in until deep in the night, because after I said yes to Mr. Lockwood, I'd have to do away with any such fantasies. When I finally fell into sleep, my dreams were filled with Nico. I dreamt of him teasing me about beating rugs. I dreamt of him putting flowers in my hair. I dreamt that he warmed my cold hands with his warm ones. I dreamt that as I lay in bed, safe and warm, he put a hand to my cheek, caressing my jaw with his fingers as he whispered reassurances. "It will be all right," he promised, and I smiled because I believed him. I dreamt that when I opened my eyes, his face hovered above my own, and he kissed my forehead, soothing me into deeper sleep. But then the dream ended, and I was cold again.

When I woke, Grace was already up and making breakfast. "Did I oversleep?" I asked, rolling to my knees and studying the light that filtered through the gaps in the shutters.

"No, I was up early," she said, a frown marring her face. "I heard strange noises last night and didn't sleep well. I kept worrying that maybe someone or some animal was outside. But maybe it was just Papa. He seemed agitated when I checked on him this morning."

"I'm sorry." Her report made me feel especially bad since I'd slept so well.

Of course, in the next moment, the weight of what I had to face today settled on my shoulders. I was going to agree to a loveless marriage to Mr. Lockwood today.

Though my sisters had commiserated with me about the unfairness of it all yesterday, they hadn't objected. Neither of them had suggested that I say no or stand my ground. They knew as well as I did that it wasn't really a choice.

I thought of Cecily and how she had escaped a forced marriage. She'd chosen something different. Then again, she'd had no one to look out for but herself, and her betrothed had been a dangerous, violent man. Mr. Lockwood was certainly not that, and I should count myself lucky. I could be content with a kind man. I could.

As I dressed, I tried to decide how best to use this day with my family. I should make the most of it. I should try to be cheerful.

My eyes skated over the socks that hung in front of the fireplace as I tied my apron. Our little display had served us well over the years, but my gaze caught on one particular sock that looked misshapen. It was too long and skinny, like something was inside it, stretching it out, and it pulled on the line more than the others.

I reached up and wrapped my hand around the sock, surprised to feel something hard was indeed stuck in the toe. I unpinned it from the line, and when it fell into my hand, there was a clink.

A metal clink. The sort of clink that comes from coins.

"What was that?" Charlotte asked as she climbed down from the loft. She was just waking up, rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand.

"I'm not sure," I said, my eyes fixed on the sock in my hand, terrified to look inside for fear that I was wrong.

"Why did it sound like money?" she asked with a frown.

I swallowed, and with shaking fingers, I slowly tipped the sock upside down. "Because," I said as heavy coins fell into my hands, "it is money."

"What?" Charlotte and Grace both exclaimed and then scrambled over to me. We all stared at the mound of coins that was in my hand. Not just the larger silver coins, but also quite a few smaller, more valuable gold coins.

"That's—" Grace gasped. "That's more money than we could make in three years."

"Where did it come from?" Lottie demanded.

"It was just...in this sock," I answered, my breaths coming in short little gasps.

"Just hanging there? But who would do that?" Lottie demanded, pulling my hand closer so she could get a better look at the coins.

"So I did hear someone last night!" Grace practically shouted, and I looked over at her. "I told you I heard something. Someone must have come into the house."

"Someone broke into our house?" I asked in alarm. Whoever it was had been right beside me, right *above* me in order to put the coins in the sock.

"They must have," she insisted. "How else would you explain it?"

"I don't want someone to have come into our home. We were all sleeping! Did we forget to bar the door?"

"We must have," Grace said. "Or maybe Papa went out in the night and forgot?"

"I suppose, but—"

"Oh, who *cares*?" Charlotte demanded, reverently picking up a gold piece.

"They left us this!"

My thoughts tripped over themselves. "Maybe it was a mistake," I argued.

Charlotte's look told me that was a ridiculous notion, and I knew she was right. "Someone didn't *mistakenly* leave a pile of money inside one of our socks. It was deliberate. Just as deliberate as when Mr. Closs left that sack of food with the silver pieces inside for us to..."

She trailed off. A hush fell as the truth dawned on us.

"Nico." His name slipped from my mouth. "It was Nico." My mouth gaped, and I blinked in shock.

"Don't you dare," Charlotte said, suddenly yelling. "Don't you dare tell me we have to give it back! Whether it was him or not, he *gave* it to us. He wants us to have—"

"I know, Lottie." I held up a hand to stop her tirade. "I'm not going to suggest we give it back."

She was visibly relieved, but it took her several moments to calm down.

"Good," she finally said.

Yes, it was difficult to accept this boon, but I liked to think that I'd learned a good amount of humility in the last few months. And Lottie was right. It wouldn't be sitting in that stocking if it wasn't meant for us. And just because Nico was not clamoring at my door, asking for my hand in marriage, did not mean that I could afford to turn my nose up at such a gift.

So I would swallow my pride and do my best to put it to good use.

"What should we do with it?" Grace asked as we all continued to stare at the shining beacon of hope in my hand.

We all tossed out ideas. There were plenty of options for that much money, but the last thing we wanted to do was squander it.

And still, I could hardly believe it. Nico (I was certain it was him) was saving my sisters and me, and my gratitude for his gift was so large it felt like it could burst from my chest.

And yet...

Yet, I selfishly wanted more. If he was willing to give this much to help me, why hadn't he asked me to marry him? It was the most obvious and logical solution. If we were married, he could have helped my sisters by giving them dowries or providing for them. But he hadn't. He'd left money—anonously. No matter how I tried to twist his actions and manipulate his intentions, I came to the same conclusion that I had last night. He cared for my well-being, and perhaps he even felt a bit guilty about the way I'd lost my position at Fowler House. This was his way of making things right, but that was all. Despite the fantasy that had calmed me and kept me warm last night, he did not care for me enough to want to spend a whole lifetime with me. Instead, he was giving us our freedom, and that would have to be enough for me.

And it was. It was enough. But I ached for more.

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"Grace, tell her. Tell her she must take a share for herself." Lottie was standing in the middle of the room, hands on her hips, trying to boss us around.

We had decided the best course of action was to set aside a year's worth of lease payments and use the rest for dowries. We didn't say it out loud, but we knew that our father would not be in this world much longer, and when he was gone, we would lose the protection he had always given us. But when I had grudgingly suggested that perhaps the girls should split the money, and I would continue with my obligation to marry Mr. Lockwood, Charlotte had objected vehemently.

"Tell her she doesn't have to marry Mr. Lockwood," Lottie demanded.

"Of course you don't have to marry him if you don't want to," Grace said.

Hope clamored within me, desperate to take root. "Are you certain? It might be better if we just split it between the two of you."

Grace fixed me with a look. "Annabelle. Take it. You deserve this just as much as we do. More, even. He is your friend, after all."

My heart lightened, thinking I just might be able to do that.

"Perhaps you could marry Nicolai," Charlotte said with a grin.

My heart crashed back down at the reminder that though Nico had given us a tremendous gift, it wasn't the thing I wanted most. "I am not going to marry Nico."

Lottie crossed her arms and stamped her foot at me like she was still seven years old. "I thought you liked him."

"Oh, I do," I told her with a sad smile. "But don't you think if he wanted to marry me, he would have just asked? Instead of anonymously leaving money?"

Her mouth pulled down into a frown. "I suppose," she sighed, clearly disappointed. Well, so was I, but my disappointment was coupled with grief and heartache and a love that I was trying very hard to squash.

Then her smile returned. "But at least now Grace can marry Henry."

I reared back. "Henry?" I spun to look at Grace. "Who's Henry?"

"Charlotte!" Grace hissed.

"What? It doesn't need to be a secret anymore. You can marry him now."

"Who is Henry?" I demanded.

"The apothecary's apprentice," Lottie answered with a grin.

Grace was red-faced and flustered. "It's not...we can't..." She dropped her eyes back to her knitting.

How had I not known this? How had she not even told me that she had an acquaintance with the man? Was he the one I'd seen her speaking with at the Winter Festival? Was he the reason she'd become such good *friends* with the apothecary? "You want to marry the apothecary's apprentice?" I asked, shocked.

"No, of course not," she muttered to her lap.

"Yes, she does," Lottie insisted. "They thought they would have to wait years until he finishes his apprenticeship, but now—"

Grace threw her knitting down. "Now *nothing*," she said. "Stop speaking for me, Lottie. You don't know what you're talking about. We can't get married, even with the money. It wouldn't be enough, so just *stop it*." She closed her eyes and huffed a sigh. "Henry and I will wait, and it will be fine. Now," she said with authority as she bent to pick up her work from the floor. "We need to tell Papa what has happened. He's expecting Annabelle to go off and get engaged this evening, so we'll need to tell him that isn't going to happen."

My heart squeezed a little tighter. "I can talk to him, but...I don't know that he'll...hear me."

"We still have to try. We can't act as if he's already gone." Her strength and determination were admirable.

Charlotte's words were quiet when she spoke up. "But sometimes, he is gone."

"It doesn't matter," I said, agreeing with Grace. "He's our father, and we need to continue to include him in decisions as much as possible."

I stood and turned toward my father's door. No time like the present. I wiped my hands on my apron as I crossed the short distance to his room and rapped on the door.

"Come" was his gruff reply. It didn't tell me much about his mood or mental state, so I entered, hoping I'd be able to gauge his level of clarity so I would know how to approach this conversation.

He was trying to tie leather straps. He'd taken my suggestion and was attempting to train his hands to do something that didn't require him to be on his feet or wield heavy tools. His hands shook, but the knots and braiding looked good. "What's on your mind, Belle?"

I took a deep breath, relieved that he seemed to be in a fine mood, and dove in. I explained about the money, how it had appeared, and how much. As I spoke, I watched as his eyes filled with tears, and he covered his mouth. His relief at having help was palpable, and I thanked the saints that he was at least lucid enough to understand what this meant for us.

"This—" he said, stuttering over his words in his excitement. "This changes everything!"

"Yes," I agreed with a grin. "It does, and as we've discussed it, the girls and I realized that there's no need for me to marry Mr. Lockwood," I said, my voice

genuinely cheerful.

His brow pulled down. "No need?"

"Yes. If we have dowries, then you needn't worry about us, and—"

"You want to turn down a proposal?" He shifted in his chair, agitated.

"Yes..." I was suddenly much less certain.

"Turn down a proposal from a perfectly respectable, well-off farmer who will take good care of you, and who will do so without a dowry?" Disapproval soaked his words.

"But I... I don't love him."

He shook his head. "That's not all that matters, Annabelle."

"But it does matter," I insisted, trying to hold on to the relief and joy that had pulsed through me only moments before. "It matters a little bit, doesn't it?"

"Do you really want to be the kind of person who goes back on their word?" he challenged.

"I—" I hated conversations like these. I had no way of knowing if this was how he truly felt or if this was some confusion. Was the sickness in his brain making him cold and unfeeling? Or were these his honest feelings? Was this self-sacrifice something he truly expected from me?

"What if your sisters don't marry right away?"

"I—"

"What if it's years before any of you find a man you fancy enough to accept their offer? How much of that money will we chew through in that time? Would there even be enough left for a decent dowry for *one* of you?"

"But..." His warning hit me right in the chest, knocking the wind out of me. He was right. This money could save us if used wisely. But was splitting it three ways and hoping we'd find husbands the wisest choice? Or would that be squandering the gift that Nico had given us?

He reached out, gripping my hand fiercely. "I know it's not fair, Belle. I know, and I'm sorry." His voice broke, and I could see the anguish in his eyes.

So this *was* my father.

"But we all know I won't be around much longer. My body betrays me more and more each day. My mind is going even faster. I know it's not what you dreamed, but I can't think only about you. I have to think of your sisters too. If I'm gone and the three of you are left on your own, think of what will happen to you." He leaned in, his eyes pleading. Then his expression turned to one of horror. "Saints above, this man stole into our home in the middle of the night. When I'm gone, what's to stop some nefarious character from doing the same, but with horrifying consequences?"

My heart plummeted, practically hitting the ground, and I swallowed hard.

His grip and his gaze intensified. "You have no brothers, no uncles, no men to watch over any of you. At least if you marry this farmer, you will have a husband, and your sisters will have a brother-in-law. And then maybe, *just maybe*"—his desperate grip tightened until it was painful—"I will be able to breathe without terror before I die."

Tears squeezed from beneath my lashes as I shut my eyes in resignation. Silent tears. The tears of someone who had accepted the hard choice that must be made.

My father was right. If my sisters were to have any hope of surviving after my father died, I had to take what was being offered.

MY FEET FELT heavy, like the weight of a thousand horses was dragging me down and holding me back. As much as I told myself that delaying wouldn't change the outcome, I couldn't seem to increase my pace. The sun set at my back, and the snow had started a few minutes before.

I tried to appreciate the beauty of the falling snow in the fading light while lecturing myself about looking on the bright side and being grateful for what I'd been given. My sisters would be taken care of. None of us would starve. My husband would be kind and considerate. I would take solace in that.

As I turned onto the lane that led to the farmhouse, a figure up ahead caught my attention, and my feet stuttered to a stop. Nico was standing thirty paces ahead, his hands in the pockets of his coat, and his shoulders hunched because he had no scarf.

What was he doing here? He wasn't meeting with a farm manager, not at this hour, and the way he stood there, waiting, made it seem like *I* was the reason. Perhaps he wanted to be sure we'd found the money.

After several tumultuous moments, I convinced my feet to keep moving forward, keeping my eyes on him the whole way, knowing that after I reached the farmhouse and accepted Mr. Lockwood's proposal, moments such as this would be impossible.

Forbidden. Inappropriate.

I didn't try to maintain my distance this time, stopping when I was only a step away, admiring the way the snowflakes clung to the ends of his curls that stuck out from under his hat and the way his coat stretched over his shoulders. I remembered the dream I had that perhaps wasn't a dream, and I couldn't help the smile that curled my mouth and heated my cheeks. "You were in my home last night."

I watched him swallow like he was nervous. "Yes, I was."

I chewed on my lip, thinking of all his admission meant.

"Does that...bother you?" he asked, his nerves showing even more.

"I have many mixed up feelings about it."

"Such as?"

"It's disconcerting to know someone could come right into my home, where I was sleeping, and I had no idea." That niggling terror had dug itself deep into my chest after my father had pointed it out.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he said softly.

My head shook, and I gave him a small smile. "You didn't. But my father pointed out how lucky we were that it was you intruding and not anyone else."

His face tumbled immediately into concern, and he swallowed.

"However, I also am desperately relieved and overwhelmingly grateful." My smile twisted to the side, and I tilted my head. "You accuse me of being an avenging angel, but it's clear you are the miracle worker."

He shook his head, his gaze sweeping over my face. "No miracle. Just...access to funds."

I sobered as my gratitude welled up. "You gave me and my sisters an unfathomable gift, and I will love you forever for that kindness. My sisters will be taken care of because of that money." My voice wobbled. "You are a *saint*, Nico, an

absolute saint, and I'll never be able to say thank you enough. You know that, right?"

"I don't want thanks."

Confusion made me frown a little. "Then what do you want?"

He took a tiny step closer to me. "I want you to be free to choose. I want you to be happy. I want..."

I waited to see if he would finish, but he didn't. He *had* given me the freedom to choose. And I had chosen. "That's unbelievably kind of you."

Uncertainty flickered across his face. "*Are* you going to be happy?" he asked as if he expected something else from me, but I couldn't imagine what.

Would I be happy? Yes. In some ways, I would. "I will be happy that my sisters have dowries. They will be able to marry now and be taken care of. I will be happy knowing the lease will be paid. That makes me happy."

His brow furrowed. "And what about you? If you've decided to use the money for dowries, then if you wish to marry, surely—"

I cut him off, not wanting him to give me false hope. "I don't need a dowry. I will already be taken care of." I blinked up at him with what I hoped was a cheery expression.

His face fell into confusion and then morphed into something more like horror. "Annabelle—"

"It made more sense, splitting it only two ways, especially since we'll need a good portion of it just to ensure the lease is paid," I explained, needing him to understand, needing him to agree that this was for the best so that I could stop second-guessing myself. "It turns out that Grace is desperately in love with the apothecary's apprentice, and if they are going to make it work, they need as much help as they can get. Plus, there will be a little extra for Charlotte until she's old enough to want to marry."

He closed his eyes, like I'd disappointed him, or like he wanted better for me, or like...like he *cared*. He pressed his lips and breathed out carefully through his nose. "So, when you say you will be taken care of, what you mean is...you are marrying Alexander?"

"Yes." I was proud that my words did not tremble.

"No," he said, shaking his head, completely baffled. "No, you can't do that. You can't marry my brother."

His vehemence surprised me. "He is kind and good, is he not? So, then why should I not marry him?"

"Because you don't want to be forced into marriage," he said, bending so that we were at eye level. He spoke slowly and deliberately. "You told me—plainly and vehemently—that you could think of nothing worse than *that*. Why do you think I gave you that money?" He looked more than frustrated now, almost angry. "And now, you're choosing the forced marriage?"

"Yes," I said, hating that he seemed upset but completely confused by it as well. "You gave me the money so I could choose, and I did. I chose this. This is best for everyone."

"Everyone but *you*," he said, his finger shaking as he pointed it at me. "You're sacrificing yourself so everyone *else* can be better off than *you*."

"And what's wrong with that?" I demanded. How could he fault me for wanting to take care of my sisters the best way I could?

"You don't always have to put everyone else first, Belle."

I sucked in a breath and fell back a step. He'd never called me that before, and the way he said it did horrible, wonderful things to my heart. "Don't call me that," I



begged in a whisper.

His eyes narrowed as he leaned closer. "Why not?"

Tears suddenly welled in my eyes as all that I would not have jumped to the forefront of my mind. "Because it makes me think that you care."

His nostrils flared, and he took a step toward me. "Believe me, I care a great deal."

"Why?" I demanded.

"Because you should be marrying *me*!" He jabbed a finger into his chest as he looked on me with agony. "*I* want you. But I can't say that, because I don't want you to choose me out of desperation. I don't want you to marry me just to avoid marrying Alexander. I want you to choose me because you adore me the same way I adore you." He looked like a madman, his eyes frantic, his jaw clenched, and his breathing labored. "I want you to ache for me whenever I'm not around. I want..."

I stood there, my breaths rushing in and out in short little gasps as I tried to take in what he was saying. "You want...?"

"You," he said simply. "All of you."

I went still and numb as sudden warmth rushed through every part of me. Nico's eyes were pleading and vulnerable, and it took me several long seconds to realize all the implications of what he'd just said. Then elation flooded my eyes with tears. "You want me?" I choked out.

"Yes," he breathed.

I leaned in, almost in a trance, and laid a hand on his cheek, needing to touch him. He immediately grabbed my wrist and turned his face into my hand so he could kiss my palm. Then he looked at me and swallowed hard, waiting.

Tears threatened to fall, but my smile did its best to chase them away. I cradled his cheek, letting my thumb brush over his bottom lip as I started to believe that maybe, *maybe*, I was about to get everything I'd ever wanted. "I didn't think I'd ever get the chance to say this." A teary chuckle escaped my lips. "I thought I would marry Alexander and never have the chance." I swallowed with difficulty, feeling suddenly hot even with snow swirling gently around us. "But now I get to say it."

"Say what, darling?" He kissed my thumb.

My lips parted, and I struggled for several moments before getting the words out. "I love you." It was quiet and firm.

His eyes closed as he sighed.

"I think I have for some time, since Fowler House," I continued, relief and joy bubbling up at the chance to say all the things I'd been thinking for so long. "I admire everything about you—the way you treat others and the way you take care of me." I reached up with my other hand and brushed a few snowflakes out of his hair.

He looped a hand around my waist and urged me closer. "And will you let me continue to take care of you?" He dipped his head and kissed me sweetly, making my whole body sag with the tenderness of it. His kiss seared into every part of me, and I started to truly believe that this moment was real. After several gentle kisses pressed to my mouth, he pulled back to meet my eyes. "Because I've been falling in love with you since the moment we met."

My own ragged breathing met my ears. "You have?"

"Of course I have. How could I resist?" The corner of his mouth curled up in a lopsided smile. "With your rug-beating prowess and your epic toy battles."

I laughed, letting my head fall forward against his chest.

He cradled the back of my head with his hand and kissed the top of my head. "You really should marry me. At this point, I wouldn't even mind if it was for my

money,” he murmured.

My breath caught, and I instantly sobered, looking up at him. “Do you mean that?”

He brushed his fingers down the side of my neck. “Marry me? Let me take care of you, Belle.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat but gave a fierce nod. “I certainly *shall* marry you, and it will *not* be for your money.”

A slow smile curved his delicious mouth. “Then why?”

“Because I am very much in love with you. And I plan to take care of you just as much as you take care of me.”

He grinned and bumped the end of his cold nose against mine. “Your terms are acceptable.”

I moved my hands so that one rested on his heart, and the other gripped the back of his neck. “Nico?”

“Yes, my love?”

“I’m ready for my next lesson.”

His eyes narrowed with heat as he looped his other arm around my lower back and pulled me snugly against him. “And what lesson is that?”

“How should one kiss their fiancé?”

He lowered his head until his mouth hovered just above mine. “Shall we find out?”

“Yes, please.”

His lips settled on mine, brushing, pressing, tugging, and savoring. As it turned out, kissing one’s fiancé was much less...sedate than a first or second kiss. That meant it wasn’t difficult at all to keep one another warm, though the snow continued to fall, and the temperature continued to drop. I was blazing with love and light and the knowledge that I had just agreed to marry a man who loved me in every way that mattered.

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“I can’t believe you nearly let me marry Alexander,” I said as we meandered slowly down the lane toward Alexander’s home, my arm tucked around his and my head on his shoulder.

“I can’t believe my cad of a brother proposed to you.”

“Is it going to be terribly awkward when we arrive?” I asked, nervous about confessing to my employer that instead of marrying him, I was going to marry his brother.

Nico’s snort set my mind at ease. “I doubt it. When I came to yell at him for proposing to you, it didn’t take him long to deduce that I was in love with you. I’m certain he’ll be glad I had the nerve to speak up about it.”

I chuckled. “You yelled at your brother?”

“Of course I did. It’s bad enough that he got to be with you day in and day out, but to then have the audacity to try to steal you from me...”

I looked up at him, amused by the way he pouted over the thought. I couldn’t help a grin. “Were you jealous, love?”

He fixed me with a *look*. “He asked you to marry him, and you almost said yes. I was raging with jealousy.” He pulled me closer, keeping me cocooned against the cold.

I’d never felt so secure or taken care of. The feeling of *belonging* was profound as I soaked in his warmth.

He pressed a kiss to my hair and murmured, “I can’t believe I have you.”

I closed my eyes, overwhelmed by the beauty of the moment and the stark contrast between my feelings now and the utter turmoil I'd been suffering for the past two days. "You've changed my life completely. You know that, right?" I asked.

"I plan for us both to change each other's lives in many wonderful ways."

I smiled but then frowned just a bit. "I can only think of one downside."

He pulled back to look at me, concern marring his handsome face. "What's that?"

"Well, when we marry, I will live with you at Fowler House, and then I will have to be around Brunson." I couldn't help the way I spat his name.

"Ah," he said with a smile. "I have very good news on that front."

I sucked in an excited breath. "You do?"

"Brunson is no longer employed at Fowler House."

A breath of relief whooshed out of me. "That's wonderful! How did you do it?" I'd started to believe Brunson's influence was too great for him ever to be dismissed.

"I caught him breaking something of Willa's," Nico said with a dramatic lift of his brow. "That was the final piece I needed. Lord Calderon won't stand up to Lady Calderon on most subjects, but when it comes to Willa..."

I just nodded. We all knew that Lord Calderon would reorder the stars for Willa if she asked. "So he's really gone?"

"He is," he assured me, and the light and hope I saw in his eyes bolstered my own hope.

"I'm just—" I swallowed hard, my eyes burning with unshed tears. "I'm so glad, Nico. I've worried about the others."

"I'm surprised you had any room to worry about Fowler House with all you've been dealing with at home. When I first saw you at your cottage, I was terrified for you." He caressed my cheek, as if needing to touch me to assure himself of my well-being. "The light in your eyes was so dim."

His assertion rang true, but it also made me realize what a difference the last hour had made. I turned to face him fully. "And how do my eyes look now?" I asked, wanting him to witness the change I felt in myself, the change that he had caused.

A slow grin spread over his mouth as he brushed the backs of his fingers along my jaw. "Sparkling. Beautiful." He leaned in to kiss my cheek. "Warm and vibrant." He kissed my other cheek. "Inviting and alive." Then his lips pressed to mine, slow and searching, sending heat down my spine and through every limb.

This—he—was everything I wanted and everything I thought I'd never have.

When he pulled back, I brushed my fingers over his temple and then into his curly hair, basking in the love shining from his eyes. "You are the greatest gift I will ever receive."

He closed his eyes and pressed his forehead to my own. "And you're mine."

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## EPILOGUE

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### *FIVE YEARS LATER*

The fire crackled merrily, and I was in my favorite spot, curled up on my husband's lap in a comfortable armchair. My head was nestled on his shoulder, and one of his hands rested on my knee while his other rubbed lazy circles on my back. An empty mug sat on the table beside us, the taste of spiced cider still heavy on my tongue.

Our cottage was one of the closest to Fowler House, giving Nico easy access to and from the estate. Our two boys were sleeping in the nursery at the back of the house, giving us the quiet we needed to make our selection.

"Perhaps the Nevins?" he suggested. "Their boy has been ill."

"Yes, but both of his parents are alive and able," I pointed out.

"True," he conceded. "Who did you have in mind?"

It was December first, and as was our tradition, we were going to choose a family that could use a miracle in their lives. I'd been hesitant to suggest it the first year after we were married, but Nico's eyes had lit up like it was the greatest idea he'd ever heard. The gift he'd left my family had completely transformed our lives, and I was happy to be able to provide that gift to others.

"I was thinking perhaps the Lawtons?"

"Ah, yes." He pressed a kiss to my head then spoke into my hair. "Mr. Lawton was injured during the harvest."

I nodded. "He's still not back on his feet, and Minnie is expecting another baby."

"Very well. How shall we deliver it this year?"

I lifted my head from his shoulder and grinned at him. "What's wrong? You don't want to break into their home?"

He shook his head with a smile. "You know very well that I only break into homes of women I hope to marry."

"Ah, yes. I'd forgotten."

"Perhaps you could simply leave a pair of finely knitted socks for her to find the next time Kris goes to play with Ronnie."

"And have the money tucked inside?"

He nodded.

It was a tempting thought, since it was so reminiscent of what he'd done for me. "It's a good idea except that she's bound to recognize the fine workmanship of my sisters, and we really must remain anonymous," I pointed out grudgingly.

"True." He gave a shrug. "Give her the socks anyway, and leave the pouch somewhere that she won't find it immediately."

The idea of being responsible for the entire delivery of our gift made me a bit nervous, but it also made me brave. "I can do that."

"I know you can." He squeezed me a little tighter. "Anyone who can chase down a naked toddler through a garden and still look as beautiful as the day we met can do anything."

I tipped back my head and laughed. "Yes. Kris and Gabriel remind me daily that I probably owe my parents many apologies for things I can't even remember."

“Your father would be proud of you.”

My smile was peaceful but edged with sadness.

Papa had passed away nearly four years ago, only a few weeks after our son Kris was born. Papa had been able to meet his grandson but only had a few lucid moments before his confusion and agitation returned, and Mrs. Weaver had needed to step in to calm him.

Soon after Nico and I had married, we had hired Mrs. Weaver as a caretaker for my father. This not only provided care and company for my father, but it took the burden from my sisters’ shoulders. Thanks to Mrs. Weaver, we’d all been able to reclaim our relationship as his daughters, and though the last year of his life had been terrible to watch and experience, there had been moments of profound understanding and healing as well.

“So it’s decided, then?” Nico asked, no doubt wanting to pull me from my somber thoughts. “Our gift will go to the Lawtons this year?”

“Yes, I believe that’s the best decision,” I said. I’d spent months listening and observing, trying to see what family would benefit the most, and I was confident that the Lawtons were a good choice.

We couldn’t help everyone, but after all we’d been given, we could help a few. And as our children grew, we would teach them about the importance of looking out for others and giving what you can without giving too much of yourself away.

As I snuggled back into Nico’s chest, I sighed in contentment, forever grateful that he had taught me that very lesson.

“Are you happy, Belle?” Nico murmured quietly enough that I almost didn’t hear him over the popping of the fire.

“Immensely so. I have everything I need. I have children to love and a husband to care for.”

He picked up my hands and started kissing the tips of my fingers. “And what of me? Have I done well enough in caring for you?”

A contented sigh curled my mouth. “There is no one better for the job.”

He hooked a finger under my chin so I would look up at him. “And it is my favorite job,” he said before pressing a kiss to my lips.

*The End*

## To My Readers

Thank you for reading! If you would like to know what was going through Nico's mind when Annabelle told him she was engaged, I've written a bonus scene for that! You can read it, as well as other extras and bonus scenes, if you [go to my website and sign up for my newsletter](#).

If you enjoyed *The Hidden Gift*, please recommend it to others!

All the advertising in the world cannot compare to real people recommending it to their friends. Please take a minute to leave a review (a sentence or two is great) for other potential readers on Amazon, Goodreads, or anywhere else. Word of mouth is essential for me to get the word out, so if you enjoyed reading Annabelle and Nicolai's story, tell a friend! Take a photo of the book and post it on social media. Tag me. I'd love to see my readers out in the world.

When researching for this book, I realized that there really isn't much to go on. Father Christmas/Santa Claus/Saint Nick have a few different origins, and unlike a traditional fairytale, there isn't much of a plot that goes along with them. However, the story of Saint Nick saving three sisters from slavery by tossing bags of money down their chimney to provide dowries caught my attention, and thus, *The Hidden Gift* was born! There is also the tradition of Father Christmas being represented as the embodiment of Christmas in a mummer's (pantomimist) play. Thus, I cast Nico in a pantomime at the winter festival.

You might wonder if I gave Annabelle's father a specific condition. Yes and no. Since this is set in a world where brain conditions were not well understood, I wanted to present it the way that the characters would have experienced it—vague and confusing. I essentially gave him a brain tumor, though his symptoms could also be explained by mad cow disease.

You can also follow me on Instagram (@AnnetteKLarsen) or [Facebook](#) (authoraklarsen).

Happy reading!

Annette K. Larsen

Also by Annette K. Larsen

*Tales Of Winberg series:*

*Hooked* (Cecily and Falstone)

*Cloaked in Scarlet* (Emeline and Hunter)

*The Swindler's Daughter* (Miriam and Rowan)

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If you would like to know what happens to Cecily, enjoy this preview of her story...

# HOOKED

**Peter Pan Reimagined**

**Prologue**

*Before*

I knew no words would change my situation as I watched my uncle making final checks and preparations on the coach that would carry me away.

“Your life will be much better when you are the wife of Captain Huckley,” my mother said as she fussed with some hairs that had come loose from the knot at the back of my head. It seemed they wished to escape just as much as I did.

“But I don’t want to get married.” My voice was flat.

“We’ve waited as long as we could, Wendolyn,” Mother cajoled. “But your uncle is adamant. We are fortunate that he was willing to take us in in the first place, but to allow you to stay here even after a wealthy man has offered for you? You are lucky he has been so patient. You’ve had these years to grow up, to learn how to run a household.”

I inwardly scoffed at that. I had learned to run a household long before Captain Huckley took notice of me. I’d done it for years. We had been wealthy once, but I barely remembered it. I had been only nine years old when Papa was arrested for treason. My mother and I were shocked, completely blindsided, but the magistrate’s words to us as my father had been hauled away were clear. Father and a group of merchants and townspeople had been working to overthrow the reign of the sovereign duke. My father roundly denied any involvement, but every member of the faction pointed to him as the leader, the man intended to seize control and rule Winberg. He’d been incarcerated and we’d been stripped of all our property. We’d had no choice but to go begging to my mother’s sister. She and her husband had taken us in, and for the past seven years had fed, clothed and sheltered us, though they were not particularly well off. In exchange I worked alongside my aunt, running and fetching, organizing and planning. They kept up appearances by allowing me a few new dresses to wear to public events so that I could catch a man’s eye. Then they could be rid of me.

It had worked.



I was only fourteen when Captain Huckley came to Norsing on business and attended a local gathering in which I had been allowed to participate. He'd been attentive and flattering, but he was also decidedly old. It never occurred to me that his flattery was an attempt at flirtation until he approached my uncle to make his interest known. Uncle Horace was ecstatic at the offer.

Captain Huckley was a merchant with a fleet of ships. He was not of the noble class, but his abundant wealth made up for that. A betrothal agreement had been struck. I remembered looking to my mother over and over, waiting for her to speak up for me, to object, to tell them no. Or simply to ask my opinion about whether or not I wanted to marry a man a full twenty years older than me. She never had. Instead, when the contract was officially drawn up, I was compelled to sign it as Uncle Horace loomed over me. They hadn't even allowed me to read it.

So now, only four days after my sixteenth birthday, I was being sent off to my future husband. My trunks were packed and strapped to the hired coach. I was to travel alone to Captain Huckley's house a half day's journey from here. My uncle had spared only a maid to accompany me, in order to keep everything proper. Neither my aunt and uncle nor my mother would attend my wedding. I would simply arrive, be escorted to the church, bound to a man who terrified me, and then expected to be a dutiful wife.

I knew how to run a household. I did not know how to be a wife. I did not want to know.

Uncle Horace gave the driver a nod and looked to me. My mother took that as her cue and took my hands in hers. "Now," she said in a stiff voice. "Hold your head high. Remember who you are. Who are you?" she asked in a whisper that my uncle would not hear.

"Lady Wendolyn Cecilia Stoffard," I answered. It was something my mother had asked me many times over the years. Her way of reminding me that I came from something better and deserved more, but all it really accomplished was to remind me of all I had lost, all my father had taken from us because of ambition.

"That's right," my mother affirmed, then kissed my head and ushered me into the coach where I sat across from my maid, Annabelle. I tried to believe that my mother was doing what she thought was best, but the lack of light in her eyes told me that she had simply given up. She stood back, letting the footman latch the door. If only she would say something, do something so that I would know she cared—not about status or survival, but about me.

My aunt cared so little for me that she wasn't even there to bid me farewell. I didn't bother looking to my uncle for pity or remorse. It was too easy to see what he gained from this. One less mouth to feed and a handsome "investment" into his financial holdings. Uncle Horace was desperate to protect himself. If only my mother had been as desperate to protect me.

And I would need protecting.

Mother refused to give any heed to the rumors. The many wives the captain had had. The way they'd all died. But I heard them, and I knew in my heart of hearts that they were true. My marriage was a death sentence.

"Goodbye, Wendolyn!" my mother called as the coachman climbed up onto the seat.

I turned to look at her, and at my uncle as he stood a little behind her, but I didn't say anything. Bidding them a good anything would have been a lie. So I simply stared until the coach rolled forward, pulling me from their view.

As we clattered down the rutted drive, past the overgrown gardens, I pulled the hem of my cloak into my lap, pressing it between my fingers to reassure myself that

they were there. Annabelle's hand covered mine, giving me hope that not all was lost. She and I had been carefully hoarding coins over the past two years, and we had worked together to sew them into my cloak hem, between the layers of fabric. Six gold pieces and nineteen silver. They were our only possible means of salvation, and I had to hope they would be enough.

## Chapter 1

### *Nine Years Later*

Despite the dirt and dust, the stables held a sort of magical glow in the morning, made even more magical by the rapt attention of the children gathered around me for a story. Whenever Her Highness went riding, I would come here to entertain the stable master's children and any others who wished to listen while I waited for her return. "And with one wave of her hand, the pixie Annabelle sprinkled her sparkling, golden dust over the fair maiden, and together they flew away from the evil captain."

"They flew?" five-year-old Lindy asked in a whisper, her eyes wide with the magic of the story. I'd only been here at Sutton Manor for three weeks, but I'd already gained a small audience.

"Yes," I assured her. "For when you have freedom and joy, all you need is just a bit of magic to make your heart so light that it lifts you right off the ground."

"Where did they go?" she asked.

I grinned down at her from my seat on the barrel in the corner of the stables. "The Never Kingdom," I answered. "A magical place ruled by a fairy princess with the kindest heart and the most beautiful smile. A place where the maiden would never be forced to grow up and marry that awful, old captain with the maimed hand and the blackened heart."

"What happened to his hand?" Ansel asked, almost as enchanted by the story as his younger sister.

"A sea monster chewed on it when he was marauding across the seas!"

The stable master's children gasped at my dramatic declaration.

"What did the pixie and the maiden do next?" Lindy asked.

"They had to go their separate ways. The pixie had other young girls who needed her help. But they will always be friends, even if they can't be together."

Lindy smiled in contentment, but Ansel crossed his arms, looking at me with his mouth screwed up to one side. "I thought these stories were supposed to have a prince that saves the girl."

I laughed at his criticism. "Many do. Would you like me to tell you a story about a dashing hero next time?"

"Yes. And there should be swords," he stated as a matter of fact. "Like Falstone," he said, pointing toward the door of the stables. "He's good with a sword."

I looked over my shoulder and spotted Princess Marilee's personal guard, Falstone, there in the doorway. The sun cut in behind him, throwing his shadow onto the packed dirt floor. He was observing quietly the way he always did, his gaze skimming over me the way it always did as he took in the stables, the grooms, the loft overhead.

I resisted the urge to sigh. Falstone would make a fine hero for my stories. He had never given me reason to doubt his motives because he'd never acknowledged me as anything other than a lady's maid to Princess Marilee.

I remembered all too well my internal upheaval when Marilee was trying to choose which of her father's guards to keep as her own. It had been disconcerting to

have so many new people to deal with. New men. I had done my best to stand tall and not let my intimidation show, but it had been terrifying, especially when Falstone had seen me. Because he hadn't just looked at me.

That first time we'd met, when he'd walked into the drawing room of Bridgefield with the other soldiers, his eyes had landed on me and done a full assessment. I knew as his scrutinizing gaze swept over me that he saw more than I would wish. He saw *everything*. And for one terrifying moment, I had felt the need to run, far and fast. But then the moment was gone, and once his examination was complete, he moved on. It was as if that one assessment had told him everything he needed to know about me and he was thus free to continue on his way without spending any more time or energy on me.

Since then, he'd not spared me more than a glance unless we were conversing specifically about Marilee.

It had been a relief while at the same time my skin bristled at the slight. But relief won out in the end. After narrowly escaping being sold to Captain Huckley, my need for safety would always win out.

Falstone's gaze fell on me once more where I sat in the stables and I realized that I'd been staring at him, his stance strong and silhouetted by the bright sunlight behind him. I jerked my eyes away, wondering why he was standing there anyway. Was Marilee back from her ride? Wasn't it his job to guard Her Highness?

A bark sounded and Rogue bounded through the doorway, quickly honing in on my tiny circle of children and loping over to receive pats and praise before circling around them and herding them toward the door amid the sound of their giggles.

"It must be time to get back to work." I chuckled as the children squealed in delight. Rogue seemed to consider the little ones to be his personal responsibility. He'd likely try to tuck them all in their beds if anyone would allow it.

Lindy and Ansel ran to their father, Pryce, allowing the stable master to scoop them up for a moment before he sent them out to find their mother. Oliver retrieved his pitch fork and returned to the business of cleaning stalls. At eleven, he was becoming a dedicated stable boy, but he couldn't seem to resist the urge to pause for one of my stories.

I stayed perched on my barrel, watching as Marilee came in as I knew she would. Rogue never strayed far from his owner. Sir James was quick to follow, leading both of their horses by their halters.

"Explain to me again why you are allowed to drench me, but I cannot retaliate." Sir James's smile was wry as he looked to his wife. The princess's new husband was nearly as devoted to Marilee as Rogue was. I noticed the wrinkles in his shirt where he'd likely had to wring it out. By contrast, Marilee's riding habit was entirely dry.

"I told you it wasn't my doing," she said with a not-quite-innocent smile.

"You cannot blame everything on sprites and elves."

"Fairies," Marilee corrected, sounding completely serious.

I grinned. Sir James just shook his head and tried to hide a smile.

Marilee's riding habit was bright, her smile brighter, and I happily soaked in the evidence of her happiness as she and Sir James handed their mounts over to the grooms and headed back out into the sunshine. I'd give them a few moments and then follow. Marilee would need help changing out of her riding habit.

I made my way to the stable doors and leaned my shoulder into the post as I took in my fairy-tale life. Some would think me strange for describing it in such a way. What servant in their right mind would view their life as charmed?

*Me, that's who.* Everything I'd told the children about that fair maiden's escape was true. Exaggerated, yes. But true. Annabelle and I had bribed the coachman to take us to the town of Tethurn instead of Huckley's residence. We'd found positions in the same house, working side by side as maids. Life in service had been difficult, more difficult than I had imagined, despite all the work I'd done in my uncle's house. Still, I was determined and work didn't scare me. Though I was a servant instead of a noblewoman, I had gained the one thing that I truly longed for—freedom from men who would control me.

And I *was* free. Especially now that I worked for Princess Marilee and Sir James. Sutton Manor was my home. The place where I was safe, and loved, and free. The place where I was never afraid, never controlled, never abused. This was my Never Kingdom...

[You can find \*Hooked\* on Amazon...](#)

## Acknowledgements

Firstly, a huge thank you to the other Christmas Chronicles authors! This collaboration has been a joy to work on, and I've loved working with every one of you. A special thanks to Abigail Manning for putting it together, and a shout out to Mary Mecham who had the idea for a Father Christmas origin story in the first place.

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And a big thank you to my editor, Jana, who gave me the bad news that my first draft was more than a little rocky and needed to be re-written from dual point of view to single point of view. You were absolutely right.

### About the Author

I love words. I always have. In songs, in poems, in books, in movies—words move me. In my younger years, I dabbled in writing as a therapy and an escape, but I never expected it to become more than that. While deep in the depths of mommyming several small children, I took seven years to write my first book, *Just Ella*. During that time, I taught myself how to write a novel through a whole lot of trial and error. Not the most time-efficient method, but it gave me an education I wouldn't have received from a class or a how-to book. Something about the struggle of writing without a formula or rules worked for me. I wrote for me. I wrote from my heart space, and I think that's the reason that *Just Ella* has found room in so many of my readers' heart spaces.

I write clean romance because I love it. I love the discovery of new love. I love the relationship building that's done with looks, words, brushing fingers, and tentative kisses. Jane Eyre is the hero of my youth and taught me that being true to yourself and clinging to your convictions will be hard, but it will bring you more genuine happiness than giving up on yourself ever can.

I am an extraordinarily happy wife and a mother of five kids. I've lived in Utah, Arizona, Missouri, and Virginia, but my heart is now firmly ensconced in Idaho, where we've built a home and a community.

I love chocolate, waterfalls, pretty teacups, the sight and sound of ocean waves, and most especially my husband and my five beastlings. I love books that leave me with a sigh of contentment, and I aspire to write stories that do the same for my readers.